

秋月アスカ

岸田メル

道果て

向

こうの

光

人の里女に達、約束



Light Beyond

– Michi Hate No Mukou No Hikari –

- Volume 2 -

Two Saints And A Distant Promise

-Author-

Akizuki Asuka

-Artist-

**Kishida Mel
Shirosaki Saya**

[Yumemiru Sekai]

Prologue

Do not worry, and look forward.

If done, the “feelings” you have nurtured up to now without giving up, even if they are released from your hands, will steadily rise up, and you will notice that you have started to walk.

It is difficult to change things.

No matter how hard you work, the fruit of your efforts will not appear immediately. But, even if you cannot see it, a change has certainly “started”.

That is why you should believe.

You should walk on the path you believe in.

As long as the flickering light beyond the road’s end is within sight.

Chapter One

I hope the flower blooms soon, a young girl said.

Yeah! I hope it blooms soon. Yuna answered with a smile.

In a quiet garden surrounded by tall walls, flowers that weren't planted or bought swayed in the wind. In there, Yuna and the other girl surrounded a small sprout and exchanged grins. It was a baby plant, smaller than even their palms. It wasn't unusual to Yuna, whose family ran a herbal store, but when she looked at the other girl who stroked its leaves sweetly, her own face naturally smiled. I hope it blooms soon, Yuna thought from the bottom of her heart.

A little tired from crouching for so long, Yuna stood up and stretched. When she closed her eyes and raised both arms to the sky to stretch, a groan slipped out. Her body felt refreshed and lighter- but at the same time she felt something disquieting, and so Yuna opened her eyes with a snap.

The young girl had disappeared.

Alone, the sprout that was left behind shook helplessly in the wind. Yuna blinked many times and looked around to search the area for the young girl who disappeared. And then she noticed something. Something was different with the view she had just been looking at. The garden was cramped and the walls of the building that had looked like they were hanging over her didn't seem so high. Her view, which should have been close to the ground, was now closer to the sky.

The world had shrunk.

Is what she thought, but she immediately realized that wasn't it and held her hands open to the sky. Long and nicely-shaped fingers trembled slightly. They weren't small, soft, and warm hands that made one want to wrap them up. These were, unmistakably, the hands of an adult.

That's right, she wasn't a child anymore. Yuna closed her hands and lowered her arms. At the same time, a strong wind blew and scooped up her golden hair, as if trying to run away with it.

“You’re here in a place like this.”

As she stood there, trying to keep her hair down, the calm voice of a man trickled down Yuna’s back. She knew who the owner of that voice was without needing to turn around. When she turned around instead of replying, Asyut was coming up to her with a soft smile.

“Your hair is disheveled.”

Asyut reached out gently to Yuna while chuckling. Touched by that large hand with the utmost gentleness, Yuna’s eyes closed partly in pleasure. As he tucked her long hair behind her ear, the warmth from his fingers spread gradually. The indistinct uneasiness she felt just a few moments ago vanished, and her chest slowly filled with the thought of wanting this moment to continue for a long time.

“Shall we return, Lady Celiastina?”

Hearing that name called in a whisper, Yuna turned her gaze, which had been lowered, to Asyut.

She was- yes, Celiastina.

The supreme being called a saint that, just by living in this country, would promise prosperity to the world. The only one in this world, with absolutely no substitute. The only one in this world, with no possible substitute. A special being.

She was no longer Yuna. There was no one who would call her Yuna.

She knew that, and yet this truth still overwhelmed Yuna.

Asyut’s voice, eyes, and warm fingers, were not for Yuna. He was always facing “Celiastina”.

Hey, Asyut, the one in front of you isn’t Celiastina. In truth, I’m a completely different person. What would you do if I said that? Would you believe me? Would you accept me?

However, a future of knowing that answer would never come around.

As Yuna sunk into a slow despair, she noticed Asyut had turned his back and started

walking. His regular pace gradually carried his back farther and farther away. Yuna tried to hurriedly chase after him but, as if roots had sprouted from her feet, she couldn't move one step. Ah, was this punishment for having bad thoughts? Even her voice seemed to have withered, and she wasn't able to call out his name.

Wait, wait, Asyut.

Her body was heavy. She wasn't able to raise her arms or move even a finger, to say nothing of chasing after Asyut. Heavy, heavy. Why was she so heavy.

At that moment, Yuna noticed an abnormal phenomenon happening to her own body.

Her skin... was melting.

Slowly, like it was mud, but it was happening.

What is... this. Yuna, who should have had a frightened expression, could clearly feel the unpleasant sensation of the skin on her face dripping down. The skin on her entire body, and her flesh, was melting and dripping thickly onto the ground.

Yuna felt like everything went dark in front of her- no, the world actually turned dark. The idyllic garden scene that had just been there, disappeared somewhere, and it seemed like there was only Yuna standing alone in the darkness.

In that, there was only the echoing blunt and heavy sound of flesh falling.

(No! Someone help!)

Even trying to scream was not granted. With this much terror, she could not find the courage to check her own appearance. Instead, she stared intently at the white lump that was gathering at her feet. Yuna's "thing" was unable to bear its own weight and collapsed, slowly oozing and permeating the ground.

How long did that continue to happen. Before long, the spread out "thing" revealed two purple grains, like jewels. Even in these circumstances the glimmer of that purple, which would make a person think it beautiful, calmed Yuna a little in the midst of her confusion. However, the instant those two grains goggled and moved to fix firmly in her direction, she realized that they weren't jewels but human "eyes".

(This is...)

From those purple eyes, the outline of a face started to rise from the lump. A straight nose, shapely lips, and a refined jaw.

(Celiastina.)

A chill ran down Yuna's spine as those cold eyes looked up at her without expression.

"I despise you."

That face told her that clearly.

Breathing in sharply, Yuna woke up.

In the darkness, her rough breathing was the only thing that sounded.

Sweat poured from her entire body and this dampness wrapped Yuna in an unpleasant chill.

She couldn't move. Yuna threw her gaze into the darkness in a daze.

Helped by the faint moonlight shining in from the windows, she began to understand that what was spread out in front of her was her familiar bed canopy. Slowly, she took in the fact that it was still the middle of the night. But still, she was unable to escape her state of confusion, and her body remained rigid and tight.

"....."

Did she have a dream? That must have been it.

Telling herself that, she calmed her breathing down little by little. And then, moving her heavy eyelids, she blinked multiple times.

There was only quiet in her room, late at night.

Yuna closed her eyes, as if leaning in closer to the quietness of night. Gradually, tears appeared in the corner of her eyes.

At that moment.

Click.

There was a sound. It might not have been one she would have noticed during the day with the sun shining. But, in this hushed space where everything seemed to be asleep, it seemed like an outrageously loud noise.

A little bit of open air entered the room. And then, a very small sound of rustling clothes followed. Someone seemed to have entered her room through the balcony, and she could tell that they were approaching her bed, where she was lying down, from its presence. Was this also a continuation of her dream? Yuna kept her eyes closed and thought this dimly.

The intruder soon came to the side of her bed. But they didn't move from there and just seemed to stare silently at Yuna, who was in the bed.

There was a complete silence.

But Yuna wasn't assaulted by feelings of fear or uneasiness. Far from that, if she had to say, a feeling like "acceptance" dropped straight down in her chest. She didn't know why she had that feeling. However if, for example, the intruder were to pierce her like this with a blade, then she had a feeling she would accept that as something very natural.

"....."

How long did this last, and would it continue like this? Suddenly, the intruder moved.

Even with her eyes closed she could understand the other's movements.

The intruder moved quietly and crawled up onto the bed with a slow motion, and straddled Yuna's body. Along with the rustling of clothes, there was a solid metal noise.

At that, Yuna slowly opened her eyes.

The moonlight thinly illuminated the intruder's appearance.

A mass of black that seemed to melt into the darkness. Because of the mantle that covered them from their head down, she couldn't distinguish whether they were a man or a woman. Holding a slender dagger-like thing in their hand, they held the blade's tip to Yuna's throat without hesitation.

".....-ll me?"

Yuna murmured in a hoarse voice.

The black intruder, upon hearing her voice, stiffened.

“Are you going to kill me?”

It was quiet, but this time she said it clearly. Barely being touched by the open air, the other's eyes widened slightly.

They were bright amber eyes, equal in brightness to the moonlight.

—Ah, they weren't purple eyes. Different. They were different.

The intruder continued to hold the dagger at her throat, without any tremor. Yuna also didn't move, and only prompted them with her eyes.

For a long time, they continued to stare at each other in silence.

At the same time when Yuna blinked and breathed out faintly, the intruder finally moved. They withdrew the blade they had positioned at Yuna's throat and quickly moved it into the depths of their mantle. And then, with a slow motion, they got down from the bed and headed towards the balcony.

(Ah.....)

Lightly, and without a sound, they climbed over the railing and disappeared. It was a movement that was like an idle stroll, but at the same time one without any openings.

—They disappeared without any hesitation.

Yuna, who was once again alone, finally raised her body and looked towards the balcony searching for the form of the intruder, who had just disappeared. However, the lingering memories of what just happened disappeared before she noticed, and she wondered if the event of a stranger coming into her room was actually just the continuation of her dream.

From the open balcony door, the cold night breeze blew through the room.

(—They...)

Suddenly, tears ran down her cheeks.

(Didn't kill me.)

Chapter Two

The weather today was ideal for a departure.

Yuna finished her one ceremony in the morning and walked hurriedly down the corridor.

Her quick footsteps and leaping breath overlapped and the usual quiet atmosphere was transformed just in this moment. As if to soothe Yuna, who was impatient, gentle sunshine shone in from the window and created a loose shadow behind Yuna.

Following behind that shadow was her bodyguard, Aeneas. It didn't seem like he was in as much of a hurry as her, but there was a little bit of a bewildered air about him.

“Lady Celiastina, I do not believe you need to be in such a hurry.”

“But there's no time already.”

Yuna answered briefly and ran up the stairs. Aeneas followed after in the same way.

“We can see the gate from the terrace over there, right?”

“Yes, you should be able to.”

“Then, if we hurry we might be able to make it.”

Please, let me make it in time.

Instead of saying those words, Yuna leapt up the stairs as fast as she could and rushed out onto the landing. The flat floor, as if surprised, caught Yuna's body. As she climbed up even more stairs, the corridor that opened up was completely devoid of people. The entrance to the terrace waited at the end of this corridor.

The gate that could be seen from the terrace was often used by aristocrats for going outside anonymously. In this quiet place where few people come, even within the royal palace, the inconspicuously small gate was built as if it was part of the wall of an elaborate building. It was certainly perfect for those who wanted to leave unseen.

This time was no exception and the gate was about to be opened as if it were for an aristocrat to head out incognito. No, this traveler could not be put together with the likes of an aristocrat. In actuality, it was a person from a priest family that held more power than that and, at this time, was organizing their preparations for a journey in front of the gate.

The decision by the priestess Yodel to go on a pilgrimage was recent.

Although, it seemed like Yodel herself had decided on this early on in her heart. It took quite some time for an official decision to be handed down, mainly because the opposition from those around her – primarily from those who were priests just like her – was great.

The resistance from her surroundings was certainly not unreasonable. It wasn't just because Yodel came from a family with a pedigree, but that, coupled with her youth and beauty, she was adored by everyone as a symbol of the people of Sibelius who worshipped their God, Vida. While other priests tended to withdraw into the tower, Yodel – who showed her proactiveness and valued her relation to the country – was an important bridge between the average people and priests.

That Yodel suddenly said she wanted to leave on a long pilgrimage to many places. The quickest her journey could take was one year, but depending on circumstances it could take several years. It was not so easy to be able to set out and live away from the royal palace. Still, in the end, the priests and royal palace side submitted, which showed just how strong her will was.

Whatever stirred her up- as long as the person herself didn't say, it will never be revealed. But still, Yuna had a lot of thoughts. Although it was a short period of time, she had been deeply involved with Yodel as they clashed, and this made her feel like she had a vague understanding. Of course, this could just be her own conceit speaking. And that's why she had no intentions of talking to anyone with a self-satisfied expression or confirming it with the person herself. All she wanted to do was to, at least, watch over Yodel's departure and support her journey.

“I shall wait for you here.”

When they arrived at the entrance to the terrace, Aeneas stopped and said that.

“Huh, now that we're here already won't you come with me? Although all we're doing

is seeing her off from the terrace."

"No, thank you."

Aeneas shook his head with those few words. Thinking about the various things that happened between Yuna and Yodel, this might have been his way of showing his consideration. If that was the case, Yuna gave a single nod and opened the door.

When she stepped onto the terrace, a cool wind caressed Yuna from the side. Holding down her hair, which was blowing around and being played with by the wind, she looked around the bleak terrace. Thereupon she saw a preceding visitor, who was standing there and just so happened to be looking in the area of the gate.

She could see that it was a man wearing comfortable aristocratic clothes. From his white hair, that was mixed with gray, she could guess that his age was quite advanced.

Most likely hearing the sound of the door, the man turned around before Yuna could call out. Around his mid-sixties, the man had a gentle-looking face, which was now showing surprise.

"Oh my."

"Ah, sorry, I didn't think another person would be here."

Yuna hurriedly apologized. After the man blinked repeatedly twice or thrice, he smiled widely at Yuna.

"This is meeting an unusual person in an unusual place, hm."

Hearing those words, it seemed like this man recognized that the girl in front of him was the Saint Celiastina.

"Are you also here to see Lady Yodel off?"

"Y-Yes."

"Then you have good timing. Because she's just about to leave right now."

Come, urged by the man, Yuna approached the side of the railing. Just like she heard, from here she could see the gate clearly.

About ten people, including Yodel, stood near the gate and appeared to be exchanging words. There weren't any familiar faces like Asyut or the others. There were two other people, apart from Yodel, who were standing with preparations for the journey. They were probably going to accompany her on the journey.

Yuna thought it was a quiet departure. It was an almost lonely start of a journey for someone as brilliant as Yodel. However, she wasn't leaving on a journey that was asked of her by anyone; she was leaving on a journey for herself. And Yuna felt like these thoughts showed through.

(Yodel, take care.)

Yuna spoke these words in her heart. The distance was one she could reach if she raised her voice a little, but she didn't want to throw cold water on Yodel's departure.

-May this journey become a wonderful thing for Yodel.

At that moment Yodel, who had been shaking hands with those who came to say their farewells, suddenly raised her head. She looked straight up and directly in Yuna's direction, catching Yuna's shape firmly without any hesitation. Yodel did not look particularly surprised, and merely narrowed her eyes slightly and pressed her lips together.

Yuna also stayed silent and just looked back at Yodel. For a short while they remained like this before Yodel turned away, pulled on the reins to make her horse walk, and slowly exited out the gate.

It was a feeling of a solemn ceremony as she watched Yodel's back but, at the same time, Yuna felt a new sense of tension.

The one and only supreme being in this world, Saint Celiastina. Yuna, who was ran over by a carriage, and had her life ended chose to enter this woman's body, and obtained a transient life. It was said that the past Celiastina was feared by everyone for forcing the people surrounding her to be executed for no reason, and for being an inhuman saint. The one person who struggled hard to correct those merciless actions somehow was Yodel. And now that she had left the royal palace, Yuna thought again on how she must regulate herself. She couldn't just depend on someone else.

“.....She left, huh.”

The man, who had been similarly silent beside her, murmured that with deep emotion.

"It will be lonely from here on. Lady Yodel was stubborn and at times inflexible but, to that extent, she was someone people relied on."

".....Yes, that's true."

"Oh my, oh my."

The man smiled mischievously and tilted his head.

"Do you really think that? Lady Yodel has treated you quite badly, so aren't you relieved now that she's left on a trip?"

"Never! I really will be sad."

"Well, if you say so, there was worth for Lady Yodel to take up a thankless role. If she had been in the royal palace a little longer, I think you two might have been able to understand each other more. Thinking that certainly does make this a sad event."

Yuna unconsciously stared at the profile of the man who was speaking so keenly.

Those words seemed to see through her to her heart. For some reason or another they just so happened to see Yodel off together, but who exactly was this person in the first place?

"Um, are you one of Yodel's acquaintances?"

"Me? Oh no, I'm not someone who would be considered an acquaintance. I'm just an old man who, of my own accord, thinks of Lady Yodel as a daughter. Or perhaps I should say, I think it would be nice if she were my daughter, rather than thinking of her as a daughter."

"Uh."

"You are also quite beautiful now that I'm seeing you up close. How about you let me think of you as a candidate for it being nice if you were my daughter."

"Um."

“My name is Ron. An easy name to remember, right?”

The man, called Ron, continued to talk at a unique pace.

“Oh, excuse me. Who cares about my name, right? More importantly, how have you been nowadays?”

“Huh? M-Me?”

“Looking at it, I believe you seem to be living more carefreely compared to a little while ago.”

Yuna gave a vague smile. Certainly, what Ron said was true. Once the complications with Yodel and Duo had calmed down, she was able to adapt to this life with very calm feelings. There were still things she was unaccustomed to but she was able to overcome them well with the help of Asyut, her maid Nasha, and others. –At least that should be the case, but why was she unable to give a heartfelt smile.

“I have heard that various things have been quite tough. For example, according to what I heard, you’ve lost your previous memories.”

Ron added that as if it were nothing but Yuna became speechless at those words.

“Are you wondering where I learned that from? Fufu, when you’ve been in this royal palace for a long time, various stories will naturally come into your ears. I even know of the rumors which say that you are trying to regain your lost memories.”

“I.....”

More and more, she couldn’t understand this person called Ron. But, above that, Yuna felt his words deeply in her body. Recovering her lost memories- recovering the past of the lost Celiastina. Yes, that’s true. But.

There was a stinging in her chest that hurt.

“I... still can’t remember well.”

Noticing that her answer was too much like an excuse, Yuna closed her mouth.

(Come to think of it, I haven’t been able to do anything, have I.)

Haven't been able? No, wasn't it that she hadn't done anything? Preoccupied with picking up the stone that had fallen at her feet, she hadn't carefully thought about why the stone was even scattered. She had settled down, completely satisfied with the beautiful view in front of her.

From somewhere in a distant darkness, Yuna felt like Celiastina's purple eyes were staring at her motionlessly.

"Well, don't rush it. As long as you keep moving your feet step by step, no matter how small those steps are, you'll find yourself moving forward before you know it. So long as you don't stop, you'll surely arrive at your goal one day."

Right? Ron seemed to imply with his smile and, before Yuna could say anything, he clapped his hands as if just having thought of something.

"Ah yes, did you come here alone today?"

".....No, the person who acts as my bodyguard is back in that hallway."

"Is that so. No, that is good then. It's just that it's dangerous for the Lady Saint to walk alone."

"I-I'm sorry."

"It's not something you need to apologize for. But it might be better for your bodyguard if you returned now."

"Umm, what about you, Ron?"

Yuna managed to ask that with a feeling of painful reluctance. She wanted to talk with him more. She wanted more conversations.

"I am going to stay here a while longer and bask in the sun. I walk around often within the royal palace, so I believe we will meet again. At that time, if you would like, please call out to me. Those around me say that I am "loitering" but, well, I suppose it is the same thing."

".....I see, I understand."

What exactly was she searching for in Ron? Yuna gave a small sigh and nodded.

“Then, I will take my leave first.”

Ron nodded with a smile and raised a hand. Yuna replied to that shyly and left the terrace while looking back multiple times. Ron, she recited his name in her mouth. She had no basis for this, but she felt like she would meet him again.

“Were you able to arrive in time to see Lady Yodel off, Lady Celiastina?”

“Mm, just in time. Thank you for coming with me.”

Aeneas held back at the entrance of the terrace, faithfully standing at attention. While taking the hand that was extended to her, Yuna stepped indoors again.

Quite a bit of time had passed with her being called “Celiastina” like this. Nowadays she was thoroughly familiar with that name and was confident that she could respond to being called that name even in a crowd.

—But there was something off these past few days.

The discomfort Yuna felt inside at being called Celiastina was starting to become strong again. When she thought over why it was happening now, the only thing that came to mind were the events of that night.

She couldn’t remember the contents but she had an intense impression of it having been a nightmare and, ever since seeing it, the name Celiastina became a heavy burden in her. To the point where each time that name was called she felt guilt. In the end, who was that black-clothed person who came into her room? An extension of her dream? Not having any confidence in her thoughts, she had passed these several days without mentioning it to anyone, including her dream.

And then, she had a conversation with Ron just now.

Which confronted her with thoughts on the reasons for her discomfort and guilt these past few days. She had completely adapted to spending every as Celiastina. But, was that alright? Was it okay for her, who wasn’t the real Celiastina, to grow accustomed like this to everything?

“By the way, what’s next in my schedule again?”

Needing to swallow the uneasiness that was welling up, Yuna took it upon herself to

ask Aeneas this question with a bright voice.

“–Yes, the introduction of your new bodyguard.”

However, Aeneas' voice, when it was returned, was low as if it were reflecting Yuna's current mood. Unconsciously, she looked up at Aeneas beside her. His expression was awfully stiff and this just made Yuna even more confused.

“Aeneas, is something wrong?”

“Ah, no..... It is something I cannot say. In any case, let us return to where everyone is. I believe it best to hear from them first.”

From Aeneas' hand which was holding hers, she felt like she could sense his tension. What was weighing on Aeneas' mind? Was there a problem with the new bodyguard?

She heard about this topic on a bodyguard. There seemed to be talks before on how a single bodyguard for the saint was unreliable, and so everyone fretted about hurrying to find a new, suitable person. However, it would be a problem if something happened to a knight from a distinguished family by the saint with a bad reputation. Having said that, it was not appropriate for the bodyguard of the saint to be someone of status who could be disposed. Because there were these conditions, it was repeatedly put off. That they were at this point and that a decision had been made, meant that there might be circumstances involved.

At any rate, it was no use for Yuna to be worried as well here. Since she would know the answer soon, Yuna pulled herself together and hurried down the hall, lead by Aeneas.

“May I introduce Neisan Acrovis, who will be serving as your new bodyguard, Lady Celiastina.”

Returned to her room, Yuna immediately had a meeting with her new bodyguard.

The one who announced that name in a stately tone was a man of mid-thirties, who seemed to supervise the squires. On that other side stood the young man who was introduced and who lowered his head respectfully. Seeing him, Yuna reflexively became speechless.

Neisan– to Yuna it was a name that she couldn't forget even if she wanted to.

He was a victim of the Holy Jail.

A young squire who was Aeneas' close friend and who worked hard for the future. A person who should have been overflowing with aspirations but was driven to the depths of despair by the past Celiastina. Neisan, who committed no crime, was imprisoned and tortured.

(So this is the reason for Aeneas' grave look.)

Yuna unconsciously swallowed hard. Not in her wildest dreams would she have thought that he would appear in front of her as her bodyguard. What exactly was the meaning of this, and for who?

Was it not just recently that he had been stuffed into a jail and leaning against a filthy wall with no energy?

At that time, Neisan had been so painful to look at that she found it hard to look directly at him even in her memories. His body had been covered in injuries and his upper half, which originally would have been tight with muscles, had wasted away to the point where she had been able to see his bones. His wounded body had been a direct display in front of her of the many tragedies caused by Celiastina and the ruin of what once was.

Neisan had said nothing at that time. No, wasn't it that he couldn't speak; she was sure that he had been in such pain that he had been unable to say anything. He must be holding a large amount of pent-up resentments and grudges that he wanted to throw at Celiastina. Some of the Holy Jail victims had decided "I don't ever want to meet you again" and it would be natural if he himself had thought the same. Rather, it wouldn't be strange if there was an even more furious hatred that swirled inside him.

"Why.....?"

Before a greeting, before anything, that question was what first jumped out of her mouth. Neisan, who received Yuna's shaking gaze, simply looked back at Yuna without a change in his expression. It was almost the same as the gaze they had exchanged inside the Holy Jail at that time. She didn't know what he was thinking, it was an elusive look- time was suddenly rewound, and she experienced an illusion as though they were facing each other across the rusted prison bars.

"It is the wish of the person himself."

When Yuna heard the knight – who introduced Neisan – state that without inflection, Yuna could not believe her ears. She looked around her surroundings, thinking she misheard, but everyone who was present dropped their gazes, stiff like ornaments.

“Is that true, Neisan?”

When she timidly checked with the person himself, Neisan inclined his head in a relaxed manner.

“Yes, I realize that I may be inadequate, but I am willing to do my utmost.”

Maybe because his wounds from the Holy Jail hadn’t healed yet, but that slender and lanky body looked unreliable. No, leaving that aside.

He nodded. Yes, he answered.

(Is he serious?)

Because, how could such a thing happen? Perhaps he was forced by someone? She wished Aeneas was here. Yuna had no doubts that he would have known the details of this situation and told her. But he wasn’t here, and there were only unfamiliar people around Yuna.

“Does this please you, Lady Celiastina? If you are inconvenienced by such a person, then we can immediately arrange a change.”

A man, who seemed like a civil official, called out to Yuna from the side with a stiff smile. It wasn’t a question of inconvenience, Yuna thought as she furrowed her brows. She hadn’t even taken in the present situation, so how could they tell her to make a decision.

But then Yuna noticed a change in her surroundings.

Each and every person, who had lowered their faces, were taking peeks at Yuna. It was like they were holding their breaths and watching to see what kind of answer she would give–.

Ah, she suddenly understood.

She was sure that they were expecting her to refuse here. They didn’t wish for Neisan

to assume the position of Yuna's bodyguard. By pulling them into place like this they were expecting Yuna to be the one to withdraw from this topic, which was why they introduced him without many details.

So, that is to say, was it true that Neisan himself volunteered? Or did he have other thoughts? And how should she answer.

“Lady Celiastina?”

Glancing at the civil official who was hurrying her answer, Yuna sighed.

“Before I answer.”

“Y-Yes?”

“May I speak with Neisan alone? If you say you wish to be my bodyguard, then I would like to hear more about that from you, Neisan.”

The civil official turned to the knight beside him with a troubled look. The knight, with lips that were drawn tight, answered with the slightest shake of his head. But Yuna, who wouldn't overlook that, pressed on before they spoke.

“I want to speak to Neisan. I cannot make a decision on anything when we haven't spoken properly to each other until now, right? I only need a short while. I'm sorry, but leave us alone.”

If they wouldn't let her talk to Neisan directly then this situation would be more and more suspicious. It would be unforgivable if they were using Neisan, who was injured, to plan something. When she glared sharply at her surroundings with those feelings, they timidly exchanged looks with one another. She was sad that the people of the royal palace were still terrified of her, but right now it was useful.

“U-Understood. Then, several knights will remain outside the door. If anything should happen, please call on them immediately.”

Despite the hesitant air that remained, the number of people gradually decreased.

Meanwhile, Neisan was the only one who remained cool, and did not move an inch.

“Please, sit... though I guess it's strange for me to say that.”

When Yuna saw out the last person, she offered Neisan a chair, and then sat down herself in another close-by chair. Neisan gave a small bow and then nimbly sat down, opposite to Yuna. She realized, from his movements, that he must have received special training. At first glance, he had a frail air that looked like he could be blown over, but this small detail might have been his style before.

“I’m sorry for deciding this all on my own. But I thought that I should talk to you properly.”

“Yes, my lady.”

There was no expression on the other’s face and so Yuna was a bit at a loss, but still she pulled herself together and searched for her next words.

“Umm, about being a bodyguard. Did someone ask you to, or anything like that?”

Neisan quietly shook his head.

“I have not been coerced to do anything. Right now, I am requesting this with my own will.”

His voice had no inflections and she wasn’t able to discover his true feelings.

“But, just before, everyone was acting somewhat strange.”

“That must be because they are cautious of me.”

“Cautious?”

“They are concerned that something will happen to you by leaving you alone together with me, Lady Celiastina.”

“What do you mean.....”

Yuna asked her question without thinking deeply, but she soon comprehended what Neisan said. Neisan lost his life at the whims of the past saint, and now that his most hated person was standing defenselessly in front of him-.

When she stilled, realizing the true intentions of everyone from just a while ago, Neisan also pressed his lips together. She didn’t know what he was thinking and

unexpectedly she felt like those eyes, which held no temperature, were frightening.

Why hadn't she also thought about that.

She felt a chill run throughout her body. At the same time, the events of last night were brought back inside Yuna.

Midnight. Alone in her room.

A disquieting air. An unfamiliar shadow that appeared.

The silence between two people. The blade that was thrusted at her.

-And then, the quiet that returned.

That night, which she had partly treated as events in her dream, suddenly regained their shape sharply.

The intruder's bright amber eyes.

For an instant, as they looked down on Yuna, those eyes flashed with a light.

Right now, Neisan, who was having a meeting alone with Yuna, retained an expressionless face and slowly blinked. From the windows sunlight shone in and was reflected by light-colored eyes that she could see were a pale gold, and of which looked very similar to the eyes of that night.

Her heartbeat steadily became faster.

(No way.)

"If it is true that you volunteered to become my bodyguard then..."

Just what exactly do you intend?

She wanted to ask that but the words wouldn't come out well.

"You wish to ask about my intentions, yes?"

Neisan's quiet voice took over Yuna's words calmly.

“It seems that those around me think that I intend to carry out my past grudge, but I do not plan to do that.”

“Then...”

“During the time I was in the Holy Jail, above hating you or anything, was surviving first. And it took everything that I had to do that. Finally, when it was all over, I was able to have time to think on various things. One of those thoughts was that I would surely be unable to take revenge on you. No matter how cruel or irrational Lady Celiastina’s actions are, that the saint “exists here” is the important thing, more than anything else.”

Could one make such a clean decision so easily? Even though he was hurt so completely without any legitimate reason.

Yuna’s discomfiture must have been conveyed, because Neisan added onto his words.

“I believe you are aware but, originally, my role was to perform jobs in the shadows rather than being a knight. Those kind of jobs require a person who devotes themselves to being a tool who kills individuals. Perhaps because I received such training, I do not have much attachment to living. On expectation of that point, talks were raised about me becoming your bodyguard. There were also talks about being promoted to being a squire as your bodyguard.”

“Are you saying you feel a debt of gratitude?”

“No, that is not it.”

Neisan denied it indifferently. If he had no attachment to the grand position of being a squire, then what *did* move him?

“Of course, it would please me to live a life having nothing to do with you after leaving the Holy Jail. However, that time you looked at me in that prison, I felt like I caught a glimpse of something. And it has stuck with me even to now. I do not know what it was, but I feel like it was very important.”

Yuna was taken aback. At that time, with eyes that Yuna hadn’t been able to read any thoughts from, had Neisan been steadily observing her?

“In the end, no matter how many times I thought about it, the answer would not come.

That is why I wish to choose a path that explores another way."

"And that is being my bodyguard?"

"Yes."

Neisan quietly nodded.

"Saying this may sound misleading but I want to know more about you. If you will permit me that, then I will surely be useful."

"....."

(Want to know more.....)

Reflexively, Yuna was at a loss for words.

Could she believe him? That he wasn't being moved by hatred and that he raised his voice like this, having feelings that were forward-looking. -No, in her head an answer had already come. Naturally, she should refuse. No matter what the person himself said, it could not be good to swallow it whole.

Futhermore, if the amber-eyed person who visited her that night was-.

Before she knew it, her mouth was dry.

I'm sorry, her mouth wouldn't open to say that. Yuna stared at Neisan's eyes.

It would be easy to refuse here. The problem would be settled and she wouldn't need to worry over things later, right? That way would be much easier for Yuna. And yet, there was a worried part of her that wondered if this was the right thing to do.

Yuna had to admit it; she was starting to accept Neisan as a bodyguard. People could surely come to an understanding, and even if the other person was Neisan, what was wrong with that? Rather, it was because it was Neisan, who had been hurt so much, that she wanted to have a relationship of understanding each other. That's why.

-That's why?

Thinking up to that point, Yuna felt something catch in her chest. Did she feel like

welcoming him as a bodyguard because of that reason? No, she.....

Yuna closed her eyes, as if to escape from Neisan's eyes.

Chapter Three

Neisan was appointed to be a bodyguard of Saint Celiastina.

The news rushed through the royal palace with a small commotion. There weren't many people who did not know the name Neisan. Once imprisoned on the whims of the saint, the young squire whose life or death was unknown- to think that he was alive, and serving again as her bodyguard. Just what exactly was going on for him too to follow the similar circumstances of Aeneas. It was not unreasonable for everyone to be puzzled like this.

Be that as it may, it was rather painful to just accept the criticisms from her surroundings. Even the moment when Asyut called out to her before the ceremony and said "I wish to speak to you", Yuna was unable to hide her dejected look. What Asyut wanted to talk about was clear as day. Nevertheless, it was obvious that she couldn't run away.

During the divine service, Yuna listened to the flowing music. She closed her eyes and entrusted her body to the comfortable melody. Beside her, Asyut was the same as usual and offering up prayers, like her. Nowadays Yuna didn't feel any discomfort sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Asyut, but she wondered what he felt. At the very least, she didn't feel like he was treating her coldly like he did in the beginning. He was probably intending to criticize her about Neisan, but he wouldn't be attacking with feelings of hate for Celiastina.

That they were able to build this calm relationship honestly made her happy. But she knew that she couldn't just be pleased.

Yuna still didn't know anything about the deep trench that stretched out between Celiastina and Asyut. Even when she peeked, all she could see was an endless darkness, as if there was no bottom. And though they sat here peacefully like this now, what would happen at the time Celiastina returned?

(When Celiastina returns...)

The words that she herself called to mind resounded very clearly in her head.

(What will happen when she does?)

Even when she tried to think about it, she couldn't do it well. In what way would the original Celiastina, not herself, return to this body? And how would she behave?

(At that time, I... won't exist anymore, huh.)

She could not feel a sense of reality from those words. In fact, she ended up thinking things like if that time will really come and, at this moment, could not feel a trace of that impending crisis. –And yet, one day that moment would come around and become reality. At that time, would she be able to accept reality?

Indifferent to Yuna's distress, the ceremony eventually ended without an incident.

Yuna and Asyut turned their backs to each other and stepped back to the edges of the altar. There was a sensation that the person who had, just a while ago, been close enough to touch was now steadily going away. That made Yuna's body tremble a little.

Upon arriving at the wings of the room, Yuna sat down in a small chair placed there. Attendees stood up here and there, and there was noise as each and every one headed to the exits. Yuna liked this noise somewhat. The simple noises tickling her ears gradually quieted, and it was no pain to wait until there was not a sound.

After a while, when her surroundings became completely quiet, she stepped towards the altar once again. Looking up in the center of the room, goddesses – drawn on a ceiling high enough to take her breath away – looked down on Yuna with smiles.

“That is Willibus' masterpiece.”

Before long, firm footsteps approached from behind. Even though she knew from the start that Asyut was going to come, when a voice called out to her from behind, her body stiffened for some reason.

“Willibus?”

“A young religious painter. He instantly became famous after painting this ceiling.”

“I see. It really is amazing.”

Yuna didn't know anything about paintings, but still this painting had an appeal that

made one feel that it was wonderful.

“If this is to your taste, shall we have the ceiling of your room painted?”

“N-No, thank you. Having someone look down on me in the morning and at night would be a bit scary, I think.”

“It need not be a painting of people in the heavens, we can have flowers and such painted.”

Asyut answered with a slight smile. When she saw that smile, Yuna naturally smiled broadly too.

“Well, setting that topic aside.”

However, Asyut immediately subdued his smile and returned to his usual serious expression. Even while feeling sadness at that, Yuna straightened her posture. When their talk was set aside, she already knew what the next topic was.

“Lady Celiastina, I heard that Neisan was appointed as your bodyguard.”

Ack, here it was. Yuna’s face became glum.

“Of course, you do remember who he is, right?”

“...I remember.”

“Then why?”

That question was more of a demand than an inquiry. There was a clear note of criticism, and it felt like he was trying to draw out words of revoking the appointment from Yuna rather than asking for her reasons.

“I believe Neisan is composed. I don’t think he’s planning anything like how everyone seems to be saying.”

“If he looks composed then that is even more frightening. There is no point in making him your bodyguard if it risks danger.”

“That’s...”

Yuna stammered.

“If it’s possible, I want Neisan and I to understand each other. For that, I couldn’t reject him from the start. I want to respond to Neisan’s wish.”

Asyut’s expression became even more severe.

“Neisan’s wish. If being your bodyguard is his wish, then I wonder what exactly that meaning is. Have you thought enough about why he wishes for that position? I cannot believe that it is a wish that benefits him.”

Except for a single possibility, Asyut said sharply.

Asyut’s opinion was reasonable. He could only think that Neisan’s wish for the position of bodyguard was to obtain an opportunity for revenge against the saint. And this wasn’t just Asyut’s thoughts, but also the consensus of everyone around the saint.

Neisan said “I want to know more about you” to her. That he wanted to understand the “thing” he caught a glimpse of. Yuna accepted him as her bodyguard due to those words. But no one knew about this. And it wasn’t a reason that would exclude the “possibility” Asyut mentioned. No one was mistaken.

Looking at the silent Yuna, Asyut’s eyes softened a little.

“I apologize for my stern words. However.”

“Mm.”

I understand, Yuna implied with her nod.

At the same time, she thought over her own acceptance of Neisan’s request. What exactly was that “thing” he caught a glimpse of? A “thing” inside the girl called Celiastina-.

(That would be... me.)

Yuna clasped her hands strongly together atop her chest.

Did Neisan see another being inside Celiastina? Did he see Yuna, a completely different person?

(I see, that's what it was.)

From now on, if she spent more time with Neisan, his intuition may change into a conviction. By leaving him at her side, it meant that she was allowing this. To allow, such a kind expression wasn't suitable. It was surely more fitting to say that she was wishing for that.

(I want that...)

The real me is a completely different person, you know.

Yuna trembled when she felt like she heard her own voice from somewhere.

“Lady Celiastina, are you well?”

Who was reflected in Asyut's eyes as he called out to her in a worried voice? It should be the reformed Celiastina. And that should be fine. As she thought, it would be best to keep a distance from Neisan, who detected another being. She knew that. But, but.

“I'm sorry, Asyut.”

She was the absolute worst.

“This is all because I'm selfish, and I understand, but... but please—“

Asyut's eyes widened slightly.

“In the end, I still want to request Neisan as my bodyguard.”

Asyut was surely angry, Yuna thought as she was dragged into her sinking feelings while she gazed at the scriptures by her hand.

After that, he had remained silent, and an unpleasant silence followed for a while. He finally opened his mouth and said one thing to Yuna, who had lowered her head and couldn't think of any words. He told her to contact him immediately if any problems arose.

Asyut then escorted her like that out of the service room and to her own room before parting ways.

Haa, Yuna quietly sighed again, one of many times.

Right now she was in the middle of the Ceremony of Recitation. Simply put, it was a ceremony where many priests sat around her and read out scriptures. All she needed to do as the saint was to turn the pages of the scripture solemnly. That's why she usually thought about other things.

When Yuna was young she learned about the teachings of God and the flow of faith, but listening to the contents of these scriptures here showed that they were far beyond such a level. In the first place, it was a great task for Yuna to understand a sentence on its own, so in that situation she couldn't even claim to have an "interpretation". And that's why she checked the hands in her surrounding so that she wouldn't make a mistake in the timing of turning the pages, but when she was distracted by something else, she wasn't able to do it well and the end result was someone beside her clearing their throat.

Yuna, who stood up when the ceremony ended like that, noticed her bodyguard Aeneas waiting for her on the other side of the door. Like an old statue, he stared straight ahead without the slightest movement, but when he saw Yuna he began to smile faintly.

"Aeneas, thank you for waiting."

"I hope the ceremony went well."

"Reading scriptures is difficult. I was completely lost. But, well, I have to do my best, right?"

Aeneas watched Yuna with gentle eyes as she scratched her head and smiled wryly.

"Well then, let's return."

"...Lady Celiastina."

"Hm?"

"How about a short stroll through the gardens? There are flowers that bloom beautifully in this season."

Yuna blinked at the sudden proposal. It was rare for Aeneas to suggest something. He

always remained one step behind, the very model of a bodyguard..... although, in rare cases, he had a reckless side.

“There is still some time before your next appointment. Of course, please don’t force yourself to do this.”

“Hm, that’s true. Then, let’s go for a bit.”

Yuna also liked walking in the gardens, but more importantly she was curious about Aeneas speaking up. Could it be that he- no, there was no need to guess that he also wanted to say something about Neisan to Yuna.

(The gardens, huh.)

Suddenly, she remembered the flower field that she visited previously. The flower field that she couldn’t remember how she arrived at, where Asyut came for her, and how they spoke a little with just the two of them.

(If only we could spend time together like that again. But I guess it’s already difficult.)

To fulfill that promise of going to see the torch bugs-.

“Is something the matter?”

Aeneas called out to her in a concerned voice, perhaps because he noticed the shadow cast on Yuna’s expression.

“No, it’s nothing.”

Yuna hurriedly glossed over it with a smile. Even if she couldn’t help being flooded by sentimentality in this place, she didn’t want to trouble Aeneas meaninglessly.

(I know that but...)

Yuna wondered why her heart was steadily sinking. A cheerless feeling was spreading, and she was driven by an urge to get angry or cry.

And then she suddenly realized. These were not “her own” feelings. Ah, these were “Celiastina’s” feelings.

(I.....)

For an instant her heart skipped. Why didn't she notice immediately that these were Celiastina's feelings? She had accepted them as her own feelings without any discomfort. To begin with, recently she hadn't been able to feel Celiastina's existence much. Even though Celiastina should have been here together with her in this body, was she becoming unable to sense it?

“Lady Celiastina.”

At Aeneas' voice, she came to her senses again.

“Are you feeling unwell? It seems better to return to your room right now. We can take a stroll at another opportunity.”

“N-No. I'm fine. Sorry for worrying you.”

When Yuna pushed Aeneas' back, implying that they might as well now that they were here, he looked back at her over his shoulder with a worried look but resumed walking again. Soon they arrived at a courtyard with a fountain. There was no one in the courtyard and only the sound of the fountain's spray spread.

“It's quiet, huh.”

Yuna's voice naturally became a whisper. For a while the two of them stood silently in the courtyard, but eventually Aeneas broke the silence.

“Lady Celiastina, this may be a presumptuous question but...”

“Mm?”

“Why did you appoint Neisan as your bodyguard?”

When Yuna looked up at Aeneas there was a tension in his profile.

“When I became a bodyguard, it was something I had to forcibly request for you to allow, Lady Celiastina. But, in Neisan's case, you did not push your opinion strongly. If you refused, I am sure he would have withdrew.”

“That's...”

“Do you not think that he is dangerous? Do you not care about what everyone around you is saying? Do you not think an unfamiliar face would be more comfortable?”

“I haven’t really thought about things like that.”

“Truly?”

“Really.”

“But in actuality it is like that, isn’t it..... there is a large risk in having us as bodyguards.”

In other words, Aeneas was concerned about that. He was probably like that even before Neisan had become a bodyguard. He was fretting about having taken the role of bodyguard by way of forcing his surroundings to accept his intention.

“But I think it’s a good thing that you became my bodyguard, Aeneas.”

These were her honest feelings. He always did things directly with his utmost effort, and showed his courtesy to Yuna openly. Just how much did that help her? –But it was a fact that, when she received his gaze, she seemed to forget that she existed in this place as a temporary substitute.

“I don’t know yet about Neisan.”

“.....To be honest, even I do not understand what that person is thinking. At the very least, his feelings are different from the ones I had when I thought to become your bodyguard, Lady Celiastina. Which is why it is increasingly on my mind.”

“We did manage to have a tentative talk about some things though.”

“Even when the type of verbose man to talk about various things?”

“Hmm, it seemed a bit like that and yet not like that.”

She tried thinking back on that peculiar atmosphere. For Neisan he probably spoke quite a bit, but honestly she didn’t know how much truth was included in there.

“.....From the start, that person did not come from a noble family.”

“I-Is that so?”

“He came from a civilian life so, originally, he should not be able to be assigned to the position of a squire. There’s no need to mention being a holy knight, but even being a squire is something only nobles or particularly wealthy people can aim for. Neisan is an orphan of unknown background and so, considering that personal history, can be said to have an unprecedented career.”

“H-He’s that amazing...”

Aeneas nodded.

“That’s how much his abilities stood out. In addition, it is the king’s thoughts that having a system where only nobles can rise to prominence is antiquated. By appointing an excellent commoner, who does not spare his or her efforts, to a responsible position, it is an attempt to encourage the people to look at the “country”.”

“And Neisan was the one chosen, huh.”

“Yes. Currently, he has been adopted by an aristocratic family and so he is also formally considered a member of the aristocracy. There are several other commoners who belong to the Order of Knights. Also, there are people who have been appointed as civil officials.”

“I see. Neisan didn’t say anything about that.”

Although he did say that the occasion of being appointed as the saint’s bodyguard would also make him a squire.

“That person doesn’t want to speak a lot about his own personal history. Originally, he seems to have worked a lot in espionage. And so I believe it is his nature to try and not stand out as much as possible.”

“He did say that. But if he has such an amazing career then he can’t not stand out.”

Yuna gave a laugh but, on the other side, Aeneas’ eyes dulled and he dropped his gaze.

“I apologize for talking about Neisan just now when he is not present.”

“Eh? W-What? Why are you apologizing?”

“I really do not wish to say things about him behind his back secretly. I know that I don’t have that right, but when I think about the possibility of something happening to you, Lady Celiastina...”

Aeneas connected his words haltingly, but at the end there was a note of pain in his voice.

“Aeneas, thank you. If anything happens with Neisan, I’ll definitely come and talk to you. So it’s fine right now.”

Yuna took Aeneas’ hand as if to cheer him up. When she squeezed his hand and give it a light shake to tell him not to be so troubled, Aeneas appeared a little embarrassed. And then Yuna loosened her grip to release his hand without thinking much on it but- by the time she noticed, at some point, Aeneas was the one holding Yuna’s hand tightly.

“U-Um...”

“Lady Celiastina, thank you very much.”

The grip of his hand strengthened, together with his voice. When she suddenly tried raising her head, Aeneas’ very serious expression seemed to have come quite close. This is bad, Yuna tried changing the subject but words weren’t coming to her mind well.

“Even though I wish to be your strength, I am the one who is always saved. At this rate, the job of being a bodyguard will be held completely by Neisan. I need to be more reliable.”

“U-Um, wha?”

“Please do not give up on me. I will put in my utmost effort to be of use to you soon.”

“O-Okay. I think you’re fine though.”

He was looking at Yuna with direct eyes that lacked any shyness, to the point where she couldn’t imagine that he had been embarrassed when she took his hand not long ago. Yuna was frantically trying to think of how to answer with a head full of steam but then-.

(Huh?)

In the corner of her vision, she saw the figure of a person she had just seen recently.

At the other side of the large courtyard, on a bench that was visible between the trees, there was an old man sitting.

If she wasn't mistaken, that was-.

“Lady Celiastina?”

Aeneas peered at Yuna's face with a strange expression, it seemed that he noticed Yuna's gaze going past him into the distance.

“Ah, sorry!”

Flustered, she returned her eyes to Aeneas.

“I thought I saw someone I knew just now.”

“An acquaintance?”

Aeneas looked over his shoulder to confirm and Yuna also looked over at the bench again but- there was no one there anymore.

“H-Huh?!”

“There does not seem to be anyone.....”

That was impossible, she was certain an old man had been sitting there with his back to them.

(It was Ron, right?)

Even though it was a distant view, she was confident that the old man there was without a doubt the old man she met on the terrace, a few days ago. And yet...

“.....Could it have been... a ghost?”

“Eh?”

“Ah, nevermind. Sorry, it's nothing.”

Yuna shook her head. She wanted to shake off her crazy thought too, but she thought it wasn't implausible either. That strange old man had been able to say words that seemed to see right through to Yuna's heart, even though that should have been the first time they met.

(.....It's not too far-fetched to think that.)

"Anyway, we should head back soon."

Casually pulling out her hands from Aeneas' hands, Yuna suggested that in a deliberately bright voice. As soon as she said that Aeneas had a dejected expression, but that was just for an instant, and he soon smiled and nodded, as if pulling himself together.

"Let us take a stroll together again in the near future. There are many gardens inside the royal palace, and it is enjoyable to look around in every season."

"That sounds nice. I feel like I'd become lost if I was alone."

Yuna, who had left the courtyard behind, ducked her head as she was walking. Saying that she'd become lost wasn't exactly a joke. The places that Yuna came and went to in the royal palace was generally decided, and so there were quite a lot of areas that she had never visited.

"By the way, Lady Celiastina."

"Hm?"

When she noticed Aeneas walking one step behind her, he had called out to Yuna in a slightly stiff voice.

"There is something I wish to report, but... it is extremely personal, and so I am at a loss."

"Eh, what? Is something wrong?"

"You are aware that I was engaged, right?"

"Y-Yes."

“Well, that engagement... has been officially annulled this time.”

“Wha... WHAAAAAAT!?”

Yuna came to a sudden stop.

“.....Is it something that surprising?”

Aeneas, who murmured that, had a calm appearance, but Yuna couldn't believe it at all.

“R-Really?!”

“Yes.”

“Why is that? Is it because someone who became a commoner once can't marry, or something like that? If that's the case then I'll go to those people and have them reconsider somehow.”

“You're mistaken.”

Aeneas denied it clearly.

“From the start, it was something I had no interest in. Both my side and the other side arranged this marriage for each other's influence. My fiancée was decided when I was young; in other words, this was a political marriage. That's why when my position was divested and that was used to break this engagement, I was happy. I do not believe there is a need to bring it up again.”

“But-“

“It's fine. I believe the other person will find a new fiancé immediately.”

Those cold words weren't like Aeneas at all.

“But, if you two were engaged since you were young, then you've known each other for a long time now, right? Even if it was for political influence at the beginning, it might be different now.”

“It was the other person who said they wanted to break the engagement when I had

lost my qualifications as a squire. There is nothing easier to understand than this."

"That's! That might be what her parents think, but she personally might be in pain. She could be working hard to pacify her parents somehow, but unable to do anything, and spending every day crying!"

"I do not believe that is the case though."

"It might be. Because, Aeneas is a really great person. Leaving out your family, I think there's more than enough to be attracted to. If that was the case, don't you think that's sad?"

When Yuna raised her opinion passionately, Aeneas showed a discomfited smile.

".....Lady Celiastina, sometimes you really do say cruel things easily, huh."

"Ah..."

Certainly, she was aware that she was giving an irresponsible opinion. If Aeneas was in agreement, then her saying all of that might have been her barking up the wrong tree. Still, when she thought about how this body was the cause, she had a hard time just staying silent and accepting it.

"Lady Celisatina, what do you think of Lord Asyut?"

"Asyut?"

Yuna's eyes widened at the unexpected name suddenly coming out of Aeneas' mouth.

"Why are you asking about Asyut?"

"Both of you have been forced into something like an arranged marriage. Have you no questions about it?"

".....Well, I think that the other person probably hates it."

"Is that not the case with you, Lady Celiastina?"

"M-Me?"

She asked this to herself while being confused. What did she think about marrying Asyut?

(I don't think... anything. Because, I'm not the real Celiastina.)

When she thought about this truth, she felt dizzy. Don't think too deeply, don't think, an alarm seemed to resound in her head and everything became unknown.

"Asyut is... a good man."

Even though she knew her answer was off from the point of Aeneas' question, her mouth moved on its own to speak those words. However, Aeneas didn't overlook that answer.

"Is being a good man enough?"

"That wasn't what I... meant."

"I've been thinking about this for a long time. Marrying a woman who I don't even love. And I think that it's strange. If we are to be married for life, I want to be together with a person I can truly be at ease with. Do you not think the same, Lady Celiastina?"

"I do. I do, but..."

What Aeneas said was natural. Yuna thought that being bound to such a person would be the happiest thing. But there still existed marriages which one had to accept, whether one liked it or not.

"I know I can't say that it's too late because we're married. But, I still don't know Asyut very well and, if we can both grow to understand each other, then feelings of affection might be born."

"Might, you say. What will you do if none are born? For me, that would be extremely painful."

"Of course I think it would hurt too. But, up to now, I've been able to find many things that are good about Asyut. At first glance, that person looks to be moved only by reason, but he's a person who is kind at times where people can't see it. How many times have I been saved by that? He's helped many times in various roundabout ways so that one can't thank him. Far from any thanks, he probably does a lot of these in

passing so that no one notices."

Stop, wait. She shouldn't be saying any more than this. Because, she wasn't the real Celiastina. On that day, the real her... was hit by a carriage-.

"And, you know, lately when I'm in front of that person, I don't feel nervous. Of course whenever I'm with people who are always cheerful and kind people I have fun, but there's a person where - even if they aren't like that - I can relax around them. That's not all either. Asyut is always by my side when I'm alone and in pain. It's strange, because I don't know how he always seems to come at those times..... Anyway, although I knew about Asyut only after my engagement had been decided, I've already found so many good things about him."

(I-)

She wanted to cry.

Abruptly, she felt an impulse to raise her voice and cry loudly, and so Yuna sucked in a deep breath.

(It's Celiastina.)

In her chest, Celiastina was struck with emotion. It had been a while since she last felt emotions so strong that it felt like her heart was being shaken. But she couldn't feel relieved at that.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Celiastina.

Even while wondering what she was apologizing for, Yuna repeated apologies within her mind. When she did, the emotions that wrapped around Yuna soon withdrew, but then she was attacked by an uneasy feeling of an empty, gaping wide hole having been left behind.

(Wait, Celiastina. Don't go away!)

She closed her eyes tightly, brows furrowing, and called out strongly. -But even that was empty.

"Are you alright, Lady Celiastina?"

As if in concern for Yuna, Aeneas peered at her face discreetly.

“.....Mm, I’m fine.”

Yuna barely managed to nod back.

“But, sorry. I think we really should return for today.”

“.....Understood.”

Aeneas did not say any more than that, and resumed walking.

Just selfishly striking out with her own feelings, she was pathetic for being completely unable to accept Aeneas’ words. But Yuna didn’t know what she should do. Inside Yuna was a whirlpool of confusion that she wasn’t able to confront directly. As to why that was, she already knew, and yet she was scared and couldn’t take a straight look at it. But, one day, she wouldn’t be allowed to continue to turn her eyes away. One day she would have to face it, and accept it- it’s just, whatever was beyond that, she still didn’t want to think about that right now.

“Lady Saint, please grant me your blessing.”

The room of blessing.

Yuna, who stood at the top of the altar, gave a smile at the aristocrats who lowered their heads reverently in front of her.

“Yubius, may the blessings of our God, Vida, be with you..... How has your health been after your last visit?”

The man called Yubius raised his head with a happy expression.

“My lady, thanks to you my cold cleared without worsening. Right now, my health is as I look.”

“I’m glad. But, please don’t overexert yourself.”

Yubius gave a large nod. Yuna also nodded back before moving her gaze to the kneeling man beside him.

“Lady Saint, please bestow upon me your blessing.”

“Trevasen, I grant you the blessings of our God, Vida. It feels like it’s been a while since I last saw you.”

“Yes, for a while I was staying with my mother, who is recuperating, in the countryside. She is quite old and there are many things to be vigilant about.”

Trevasen had a wry smile as he scratched his head.

“Is your mother’s health not very well?”

“A letter was sent to that extent and so I rushed back home, but the mansion was empty. When I asked, I was told that she went out hunting with her grandchildren who came to play. Honestly.”

When Trevasen shrugged his shoulders, laughter shook the room.

And then the last one– it was just one person, a man flustered in this situation and unable to join the circle of laughter. He wasn’t someone Yuna recognized, so she was sure he was attending this ceremony for the first time.

“This is your first time, right?”

When Yuna called out in a gentle voice, as much as possible, the man’s body jumped with a start before stiffening.

“May I ask your name?”

“Y-, um, of course. M-My name is Lubner.”

His body and voice were shaking and stiff. It was something Yuna was used to seeing, but lately those reactions have become nostalgic. -That’s right, when she had first started the Ceremony of Blessings, everyone was always afraid like that.

“Lubner, our God, Vida, will surely grant blessings upon you..... I look forward to seeing you from now on, okay?”

“Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes, my lady.”

“You have too many “Yes”s, Lord Lubner.”

When Yubius chided him in a teasing way, the room of blessing was once again wrapped in laughter. This time Lubner was taken along with them and seemed to be able to show a smile.

Yuna, joining together with them, also laughed.

As she laughed though, she suddenly felt a cold wind blow through her heart. Even though it should have been a calm and warm time, her heart became chilled somewhere.

This cold in her heart, did it belong to Celiastina? Or was it her own-.

Everyone’s laughter became distant. Even her own voice rapidly went into the distance, and she stood there on the spot all alone- assaulted by such an illusion, Yuna’s body suddenly shook.

Shortly thereafter, Yuna returned to her own room.

With a big sigh she threw herself onto her bed with all her force. Her body shook as she bounced, and then the room was wrapped in a silence that was painful. It made her feel strongly that she really was alone.

“Lady Celiastina, please excuse my intrusion.”

At that moment, a gentle voice that contrasted with Yuna’s heart called out, and then the door to her room opened.

It was her maid, Nasha. She pushed in a cart that had a set of teapots and cups on it.

“You must have worked hard in the ceremony. How about some tea during your rest?”

When she saw Nasha smiling sweetly, she felt like her stiffened feelings were able to loosen. Nasha, who also shared the common point of being a commoner, was an irreplaceable friend to Yuna. Up to now, they had become good friends through discussing various things with each other.

“The tea smells lovely.”

Nasha's eyes crinkled in delight when she smiled at Yuna, who sniffed at the tea.

"Ah, I know! How does having some tea on the balcony sound? The weather is very nice today and there is barely any wind, so it will feel pleasant."

That might be good as well. Yuna nodded and jumped out of her bed.

"Then, I'll help with the preparations."

"No, that's unthinkable! I will prepare everything immediately, so please wait on the bed if you are tired."

"It's fine, it's fine. Moving around a little will be a change of pace."

When she opened the balcony doors, saying that, Nasha didn't protest any more. In the past, the two of them had washed the laundry of servants. By caring about such small details at this point would just hurt Yuna all the more, and Nasha seemed to know that.

Yuna spread out a pure white cloth onto the table, prepared at the balcony, with a thud and secured it without any wrinkles. As Nasha placed the tea utensils on top of the table, Yuna returned to her room to bring out a flower vase and decorated the center of the table with it.

"Mm, that's nice."

Just like Nasha said, the preparations were arranged in the blink of an eye. As Yuna sat down in a chair, she was wrapped with a strange, deep emotion upon realizing that this was the first time she relaxed on the balcony.

Putting her mouth to the tea cup which had hot tea poured in, Yuna heaved a large sigh.

"Haa, this really feels nice. I feel like the tea is even more delicious than usual."

"Hearing you say that makes me happy."

Nasha replied, sounding like she was relieved.

"The view from the balcony is nice too, huh."

Because this room was located in the deepest part inside the royal palace, there are no other buildings to intrude on the view. The view that she could see was just a flower garden on one side and, behind that, stretched out mountains.

Yuna was looking out at the flower garden absentmindedly like that but, between the multicolored flowers, she noticed a silhouette moving.

It was a single man. Because of her distance the view wasn't clear, but it looked like he was walking through the flower garden with both hands clasped behind his back.

"Ah."

Unconsciously, she raised her voice and Nasha also looked beyond the balcony.

"Oh my, someone seems to be there."

"You can see him too, Nasha?"

"Yes, an old man..... I believe?"

Good, it wasn't a ghost. Yuna breathed out a sigh of relief, having been partly serious. That person was unmistakably Ron. Just a while ago, she thought she had seen him at the inner courtyard, and now he was in the rear flower garden? Just like the man himself said, he really was an old man who appeared in unexpected places and at unexpected moments.

"I wonder who it is. That flower garden shouldn't be a place where anyone can just go in and take a stroll."

"Hmmm."

While she was staring at him, it looked like Ron noticed Yuna and Nasha, and raised his right hand to send them a greeting. -That's what she thought but, when she looked closer, apparently it wasn't a greeting but a gesture for her to come over to him.

"W-What is that. It looks like he is calling for us."

"I... think I'm going to go over there for a bit."

Eh, Nasha had a shocked expression.

“I know that person, so it’ll be okay.”

Although she said she knew him she only knew his name, but if she said that then she would cause Nasha to be even more worried, and so she kept silent on that.

“I’ll come back immediately!”

“Ah, please wait, Lady Celiastina!”

Nasha’s flustered voice hung onto Yuna’s back, but she had already left the room like that.

She arrived breathlessly at the flower garden. She thought he had disappeared again, but luckily she was worrying over nothing. At some point, Ron was now crouched on the ground and seemed to be rummaging around. It looked like he was pulling out weeds that caught his eye and the hems of his clothes, which were finely embroidered, were stained with a little dirt.

“Oh my, that was quick.”

Remaining crouched down like that, Ron only turned his head to look up at Yuna.

“Dear me, to think that you would really come down.”

“It’s because I saw you calling for me, Ron.”

“But I recall telling you to stop walking around alone.”

“Eh?”

For some reason she wasn’t able to understand what he said. But it looked like Ron was just teasing, and he didn’t pursue it any further before standing up with a grunt of “Here we go”.

“Now then, how may I help you?”

“Huh. Aren’t you the one who wants something from me?”

When she asked that in return, Ron showed a deep smile and then left a short pause.

“.....The instant I met you for the first time, I noticed that you had many thoughts swirling around in you, and that you were looking for help.”

Yuna unconsciously gripped the hem of her one-piece dress strongly.

“Certainly, I feel as if you are passing your time quietly outwardly. But, in the end, that is just “outwardly”. I feel like, inside your heart, you are saddled with a vague sense of uneasiness, like a child who has had a nightmare. Unable to do anything with your own power, you feel like you are being crushed by a great force..... Am I wrong?”

“A... nightmare...”

Those words shook her heart strongly. Ah, what were the contents of the dream that she had at that time? It was nostalgic, and yet terrifying. She could only recall that impression.

“If there are worries that you cannot erase within you, then you may want to try talking to someone for a turn. For all you know, you might feel refreshed. I called you here thinking that.”

“.....”

It's true what Ron said. During troubled times, it might be better to receive a suggestion from someone rather than worrying alone. But.

“What... should I say..... No words come to mind.”

The circumstances surrounding Yuna were too special. Even if she opened up about her troubles, she didn't even have a rough idea of how to convey them to have someone understand. No matter where she looked in this world, there was no way there would be someone in the same position as her. Surely no one would understand this.

“In the divine service room.”

Ron suddenly raised his head and looked around at the encompassing sky.

“Did you know that there is a magnificent painting there?”

“Eh?”

Having the subject suddenly changed, Yuna was at a loss for words.

"There is a painting drawn by a young painter by the name of Willibus."

"....."

"I quite like it since it's a work that overflows with deep emotion. As long as I have free time, I stand there and stare at that painting. Though its only fault is that, when I continue to stare at it, my neck ends up hurting."

She didn't understand Ron's true meaning as he continued to smile widely.

"Now I can even say the names and features of each and every one of the celestial people who are drawn on that ceiling from memory. Yes, for example, when I think about the most sensual one, it would have to be the peach-colored clothed goddess, Luinshista, dancing immediately to your right when you enter the building."

Yuna's mouth dropped open.

"But the one I'm most curious about is another goddess. At the edge of the ceiling, there is a goddess who has a somewhat uneasy expression and seems to be concerned about something behind her"

Ron squinted his eyes, as if he were staring at the painting right now. Yuna also called to mind the painting that she had been looking at with Asyut just a while ago.

"Because the painting stops there, I do not know what she is concerned about. But, because she is drawn differently than the others, it makes a person suddenly become curious."

".....And what did you do then, Ron?"

"I went to ask the person who painted the picture."

Indeed, that was a very simple solution.

"Apparently, who Willibus drew was the goddess, Rhodiani. I was surprised when I investigated her. In myths she is called the "fake goddess". Originally, she was an ordinary human but when her twin sister was to be welcomed into the heavens, she became jealous, and deceived her younger sister to go to the heavens."

“And Willibus drew that goddess on a ceiling painting in the royal palace?”

“Interesting, no?”

Fufu, Ron laughed.

“Looking at Rhodiani, I am reminded of a young lady who came to this royal palace several years ago.”

“A... young lady?”

Yes, Ron nodded and closed his eyes.

“She was a very ordinary and lovable young lady. But she was brought to the royal palace suddenly and, in one night, became this country’s most important existence, one which even aristocrats have to kneel to.”

“.....”

“Even though she obtained a status that young people throughout the country would envy, she always seemed to be afraid of something. At the same time, she seemed to have given up on something.”

Yuna remained silent and stared at Ron.

“I thought that she was very similar to Rhodiani in that ceiling painting. That goddess was frightened of her own past sins and the younger twin that she deceived and stole from..... Now then, I wonder just what exactly the young lady I knew was afraid of?”

“.....Did you find the answer?”

“No, I did not find one. I’m sure that it is something I am unable to find. If there is someone who can find it, I think it would be someone who is closer to her.”

Yuna stood still there and reflected on the words she received in her heart. Ron’s gaze was nothing but soft, and seemed to wrap around Yuna as he watched over her.

“I am sure that “someone” is also thinking that they want to find it for her.”

“But.”

Yuna's trembling lips moved a little.

“.....I'm... afraid. It's true that I want to find it. And yet, I'm afraid of knowing.”

“Should the ceiling painting simply remain as a ceiling painting?”

As he said that, Ron raised his right hand to the sky. Drawn by that, Yuna also looked up.

“Do you want to leave her as a person in a painting? Because it is frightening to feel that she really did exist here and, even now, she exists right beside you. –If that is the case, then that is fine. I do not mind if you accept those thoughts. They are natural feelings and there is no need to be ashamed. Rather, what would be sad is if those feelings remained unnoticed and you passed your time fooling around.”

While squinting her eyes at the brightness, Yuna bit her lip hard.

Why did Ron understand her feelings so well? Her hesitation, fear..... The conflict that she did not say a word to anyone was exposed so clearly.

She questioned what he knew, but that thought quickly disappeared into the corner of her mind.

Right now, above that, Yuna was facing a much more important thing.

“I mentioned earlier that the young lady was similar to Rhodiani. But, I believe that Rhodiani exists in everyone's heart.”

Inside everyone's heart. Then, inside Ron– and inside her?

“Inside people, there may exist “something” that they want to turn their eyes away from. Like Rhodiani, it might be a sin in the past, or someone other than one's self. Or, possibly, it might be one's own heart.”

Yuna blinked once.

And then she looked back on the time that she had spent up to now.

At the beginning, it took all she had to get past those hectic days. While she lost herself in running to the end, before she knew it, she became accustomed to life in the royal

palace. She began to feel afraid of losing those days. And then, like that, she came this far without caring about the core part- Celiastina and her own self.

(But I was trying to pretend not to notice such feelings.)

And, probably because of that, was why Celiastina felt so distant.

“Be that as it may, I believe it is okay not to forcibly scold yourself and run yourself down.”

Yuna, who was absorbed in thought, was returned to the present again at Ron’s voice.

“If the thought of wanting to find something is enough to move your feet then, first, I think you should visit the historical archive. You should be able to know the truth of the past saints.”

“Historical archive?”

For Yuna it was the first time hearing such a word.

“What was it that the young lady was afraid of? You might not be able to find all the answers there. However, it could become a start.”

Ron smiled cheerfully again.

He was a really strange person. He seemed to see through everything and was watching over her- when she looked at his gentle smile, before she knew it, she felt that it was something immensely deep.

Chapter Four

Regarding the existence of the historical archive, it appeared to be an open secret within the royal palace.

It is said to be reached by climbing the stairs in the deepest corner of the royal palace library; and that it had special documents relating to the history and politics of this country. In particular, there seemed to be very sensitive documents that would never be made public. On one hand, it was an extremely precious mountain of treasure on the knowledge of this country, but if used poorly by the current ruler, it could be a terrible poison that would drive the country into a predicament. That is why the people at the top of the country hid its actual existence, or at least those were the rumors.

If she went there, she would be able to know the truth about the past of the previous saints.

Ron's words were brought back over and over again in Yuna's mind.

If his words were true, then to Yuna that place would be just what she wanted. It would have been suspicious if she borrowed Celiastina's appearance and went around asking this and that from everyone, but there was no need to be concerned if she was consulting books, and she would be able to acquire as much knowledge as she wished.

Linus knew Yuna's circumstances, and he would be well-informed about the past saints and about Celiastina. However, she couldn't help but feel nervous at going to visit him. Although he helped during the signature matter, they still had not talked enough about her relation to Celiastina. If that subject was brought up and a distance was placed between them again then-. The blade of words that had struck her once, couldn't be immediately forgotten even after leaving.

If that was the case, then she should head to the historical archive without hesitation. Her own voice sounded awfully distant when she declared that. That Yuna wasn't able to move immediately and follow her own words was because there was still hesitation inside her.

Yuna, who was sprawled over her room's sofa, pulled a cushion towards herself and

trapped it against her chest.

-She was afraid to learn about Celiastina.

Her conversation with Ron had made her notice it clearly. Inside Yuna, there was an indistinct and faint uneasiness. It was just like he said. She was afraid to feel the truth of how Celiastina was not a being in a painting or in a dream.

(Why do I feel that way?)

It wasn't like that at the beginning. She had simply wanted to know the reason as to why Celiastina ended her own life. What happened to her? What had she been thinking? Even now, it wasn't like those feelings of wanting to know had disappeared completely. But a vague terror bound Yuna's feet to the ground.

(Am I feeling scared, at this point in time, of feeling that this body isn't mine?)

-That might be it.

(I like the daily life I'm living in this body. I want to stay here more, be with everyone, and experience more things.)

Before she knew it, that desire had been nurtured greatly within her. If it became even larger then sooner or later- would she think about wanting to take over this body... Celiastina's life?

(If that happens, then it'd be exactly like what Linus said.)

That he could only think that she was taking over Celiastina's life.

Before, the moment he said those words clearly from his mouth, she was able to strongly oppose it. But now.....

Yuna sat up with a lot of force and shook her head to change her thoughts somehow.

At any rate, she should try going to the historical archive once.

Everything else would be after that. She didn't want to stay cooped up in her room doing nothing but worrying. Keep moving, that thought was something Yuna never wanted to change.

Now then, how was she to enter the historical archive? Because it was a place the royal palace tried to hide, she was sure that she couldn't just enter it normally.

As for a person she could depend on at a time like this..... there was only one person who came to Yuna's mind. No one other than him. -Alright. Standing up from the sofa, Yuna clenched her fist.

Tap-tap, the dry sound of her knock was sucked into the thick door. The solid double door had an appearance which stated that a person of status was in this place. The door to Celiastina's room was also very fine and elegant but, maybe because it was for a lady, it was somewhat softer compared to this door. Standing in front of this tall door, her nervousness increased whether she wanted it to or not.

“Please wait a moment.”

She heard Asyut's reply from inside. Guessing from his voice, Yuna wondered if he knew that she had turned up here. While wondering this, the door opened and Asyut appeared.

“Please, come in.”

“Ah, mm. Thank you.”

When she saw how he didn't look surprised at all, she decided that he probably knew. She had confirmed with Nasha that Asyut was free at this time, so a message might have went to him after that.

In any case, because of the incident about Neisan the other day, Yuna had withdrawn with uncomfortable feelings, but there was no hint of that in Asyut's appearance.

Asyut's office, which she entered for the first time, was a moderately large and functional space where he could do work facing a desk. The desk and shelves, which were based around the color brown, were packed with documents that Yuna could not possibly understand. When she thought about how he glanced through these documents every day and gave instructions, she felt overwhelmed despite it being someone else's affairs.

“I apologize for the mess.”

“No, I'm the one who's sorry for intruding on you when you're busy.”

She sat down on the offered sofa. While thinking it would be rude, Yuna unintentionally observed the room. Asyut always did his work in this room. Feeling like she was able to faintly touch a side of Asyut, who she knew nothing about, Yuna was happy.

But, at any rate, this room reflected its owner's personality exactly how it was. Apart from a large decorative plant, there was no other thing in this room that made it look lived in. There may be some, but they weren't put in a place where she could immediately see them. The documents stacked on the desk were arranged beautifully in the corner, and she was not given a cluttered impression.

"Now then, is something the matter? Did something occur with Neisan....."

Upon hearing Asyut's voice from the other side where he was sitting, Yuna hurriedly returned her wandering gaze to him.

"Oh no, that's not it. There aren't any problems with that."

As of yet, is what she added in her mind.

"Um, you see, I heard that there is a "historical archive"."

".....The historical archive?"

Yuna felt flustered and wondered if its existence really was just rumors when she saw Asyut murmur in puzzlement.

"Once again, those are some unexpected words."

"There isn't one? Is there no room like that?"

"No, the historical archive exists. Only....."

Her sigh of relief lasted only a moment, because Asyut's expression was still not clear.

"That place is a location within the royal palace where the most important classified information is kept, and those without permission are completely forbidden to enter. It is that kind of place..... Do you happen to have business there?"

As expected of Asyut, he went straight to the point. Yuna nodded.

“A bit. It’s a part of my studies.”

“If you are studying, then I can prepare documents here that would better suit you, Lady Celiastina.”

“Hmm, but... how should I say this... I want to learn a bit more about all the details in history, something like that.”

“All the details in history? For what reason?”

If he asked like that, she was at a loss for an answer. But she couldn’t withdraw at this point because she was the one who brought this up.

“I don’t know anything about the history of the saints. I heard that the historical archive has documents that are quite detailed, and so my interest was piqued.”

“.....”

Asyut’s silence was still terrifying.

“Incidentally, where did you learn about the historical archive?”

“Um, someone told me.”

Asyut’s gaze demanded her to continue. She wondered if she should give a concrete name.

“.....Are you going to punish the person who told me?”

“I will not do such a thing. Simply, that place is not an ordinary place to come up with, and so I am curious as to what kind of person gave you that advice.”

She thought to dodge the question, but under Asyut’s intent stare, she didn’t feel like she could get away with it.

“Umm, just someone I met by chance. I don’t know many details about him, but he told me his name was Ron.”

“Ron?”

Asyut's eyes widened, as if he had just heard the most unbelievable thing ever. Even Yuna was taken aback by his surprise.

“Do you know him?”

“.....How did he introduce himself to you?”

“Uh, he said he was an old man who strolls a lot in the royal palace. That's all.”

“.....Is that so.”

Good grief, Asyut sighed.

“Then, the next time you see him, please try asking about him in full detail. I will overlook your movements.”

Hearing him say that made her curious and she wanted to inquire more about it, but Asyut looked like he had already turned his focus back to the historical archive, and so Yuna could only keep her mouth closed.

“Although it is called the historical archive, the documents are not organized or stored neatly like ordinary libraries. Assuming there are documents you wish to search for, I do not believe you will be able to do it alone.”

“I don't have a particular document I'm looking for. I was just thinking that it'd be nice to look at different things.”

“Is that so.”

For an instant, Asyut had a hesitant expression. But he immediately collected himself and gave a nod.

“Understood. Since you have an interest, it might be good to visit that place at least once. If you do not mind, I shall accompany you. Would you have the time if I were to guide you there after this?”

Yuna leaned back and shook her head at Asyut's unexpected proposal.

“Eh, no, it's fine! You're the one who's busy, right, Asyut? Um, of course, I'm happy you're giving me permission but I can find another person to come with me, like

Aeneas or Neisan or someone."

When she gave those names that came to her mind as examples, Asyut sent her a sharp look.

"Ah."

Yuna immediately felt regret upon giving out that bad name.

"Please do not take Neisan with you to a place where you two will be alone together. A place like the historical archive is unreasonable. Do you understand?"

"Mmm..."

At her ambiguous answer, the look in Asyut's eyes became even sterner. Yuna inadvertently averted her eyes out of fear and discomfort. A faint sigh reached her ears at that moment.

"In any case, those people cannot enter the historical archive. There isn't a problem with your status, Lady Celiastina, but I am concerned with you entering by yourself and having to make speculations. It is best that I guide you still."

"Is it that difficult of a place?"

"I have also just reached a point where I can pause in my work. Now then, shall we depart?"

The historical archive was on the second floor of the royal palace's library. The royal palace library was situated on massive grounds in the north side, and it was a place that Yuna had never visited.

The royal palace, which she was visiting for the first time, had a serious atmosphere that made her unable to enter easily. The large building was supported by thick pillars that were mixed with two colors, white and jade. It had a beautiful appearance. If these pillars had been made out of wood then the wood would have surely been hundreds of years old, and carrying a solemn air. There were two muscular-looking guards standing at the entrance to the building who didn't move, as if they were imitating sculptures of ancient soldiers.

Inside the building, it was pleasantly cool and dim. Tall bookshelves are lined up in a

row, as if hanging over them and as if they were rejecting those who came to visit who weren't qualified. There were no others and as the two of them walked, the inorganic sound of their shoes was the only sound that echoed. That sound reached the ceiling before seeming to be sucked away, which made Yuna unconsciously look up. Even the atrium of the second floor was overflowing with lined up books, and it was as if the building took a breath to observe these sudden visitors.

“Do people not come here?”

Yuna asked in a voice that had gone quiet.

“That’s right. There are those who just pick up books, but since this is a library with only specialized books, those who come are mainly scholars doing research. There is another smaller-sized library in the west side of the royal palace, and most people seem to go there. The west side library allows not just those in the royal palace, but also ordinary citizens, and so it is somewhat lively.”

On that subject, Yuna knew of one more other library. Actually, Yuna had even visited that place many times before. Various books were supplied, ranging from things children could enjoy to slightly difficult ones for those who were intellectually inclined. Being the only building within the royal palace that ordinary citizens were able to enter, it was very popular among the people. When Yuna had also been a commoner, just being in that place made her feel as if she was a bit of a noble. And now that she was able to quietly enter a library which wasn’t open to anyone who wasn’t a real noble, she felt that fate was such a strange thing.

“We will be ascending the stairs.”

She thought they were about to climb the noticeably large staircase but, contrary to expectations, Asyut moved deeper into the side where there were small stairs. It was a small and lonely staircase, as if used for those who managed this place. The width was only enough for one person to pass and as Yuna looked up at Asyut who continued up the stairs without hesitation, she followed quietly.

What appeared at the top of the staircase was a simple and small door. However, Yuna was surprised to see a disproportionately large and sturdy lock on it. Asyut took out a key from his breast pocket and nimbly put it to the lock. Before long, and with a grave sound, the lock opened. When the door opened, there was another door behind it. However, this time, rather than a door it would be more correct to describe it as bars.

They were also similarly locked.

As Asyut opened the second lock, Yuna observed the interior of the room past the bars. Exactly as Asyut said a while ago, it seemed like there were many documents casually put away on the shelves. It was a much smaller room than she expected, and there were only three windows opposite to the entrance that were small enough for only a hand or book to pass through. Each one also had bars fitted on them and it made Yuna think of a prison.

“Thank you for waiting. Please, enter.”

At Asyut’s invitation, she entered the room. Because the windows were so small, the sunlight wasn’t enough and the entire room was quite dim. However, there wasn’t anything to act as a light that she could see and so Yuna turned her eyes to Asyut. Asyut, who immediately understood Yuna’s question, shook his head.

“The entire library is like this, but in this room it is especially forbidden to have anything flammable. Primarily, the guards at the entrance to the library would do a physical examination and forbid anyone who is carrying tools to make a fire from entering. The same is true when someone leaves the library, and they will arrest anyone who tries to bring out materials without notification. In principle, you are free to come and go to places apart from the document rooms, but this place is one that the country is quite attendant about.”

“Then, we can’t have any light in here?”

“Yes. As there is a certain degree of light coming in from the windows, I am afraid we can only use that light.”

Everything was so thorough that Yuna was shocked. Yuna approached the small windows and opened her eyes wide when she saw the “length” of their depth. However thick the wall was, the depth of the windows were easily the length, or more, of a long sword.

“That is to prevent documents from being taken out through the window.”

There were bars on her side and on the other side.

“.....Wow.”

“Nevertheless, the majority of the documents here are duplications. The originals are kept somewhere else..... Now, what do you wish to do? What kind of documents would you like?”

“Umm... where to start...”

Yuna faced the bookshelves while feeling lost. She casually looked at the documents within reach but she was unable to understand what was written on the bundle of papers that was closely packed with fine letters.

“Would this suffice? It is a simple collection of history of the previous saints.”

Asyut offered help to Yuna, who was staring at the documents in a daze. Yes, that was exactly what she was looking for. Yuna joyfully leapt to the book that Asyut held out, but when she noticed that he had an even sterner expression than usual, she unintentionally drew her hand back.

“Lady Celiastina, I believe you are already aware, but these materials have not been publicly disclosed. They are lined with truths that you haven’t known up until now. Knowing this..... are you certain? I think it is better that you do not know. Or.....”

“Asyut.”

Yuna looked at Asyut firmly and shook her head.

After they stared at each other in silence for a while, Asyut quietly lowered his eyes. He didn’t say anything further and handed over the book.

“Thank you.”

Receiving it, Yuna flipped through the pages. Indeed, it seemed like the history of the saints up to now were recorded here. Previously, in the record of saints that she looked at in her room, it wrote about the saints from a thousand years ago in a fanatic way, but glancing at the entries in this book she could only see around 10 people. Did that mean this book completely excluded the saints that only appeared in legends?

It appeared that her thoughts weren’t wrong. On the oldest saint, the details of her birthplace and age at death were written down. It was close to the present and practical, but it wrote about the history of the saints in detail.

And its contents were shocking.

It contained the personal history of the saints, the date they arrived at the royal palace, and their lives at the royal palace. It also had things like the passage of their illnesses, their reason for death, etc. Amongst those, Yuna became rooted to the spot at their medical history.

Most of them fell emotionally and spiritually ill.

There were five saints who reached the condition of being bedridden. There were three saints who refused food and wasted away. There were those who appealed to anxieties and did not leave their room on ceremonial occasions, and there were those who smiled and acted bright and full of courtesy only in public. There was a saint with many conditions, and there were few, if any, saints who kept healthy.

The previous saint, Malveneska, was also an example. It looked like she had been depressed for a long time, but when her husband died young due to illness, thereafter she started to frequently self-harm. Furthermore, she did not accept food and, although her body was slender to begin with, before she died she had the same weight as a ten-year-old child. In the end, it appeared like she died from a widespread illness, but there must have been a large relation to how she lost the power to resist through mind and body.

“This is.....”

Clenching her hands around the book, Yuna unconsciously murmured this. But she didn't continue with any other words.

“What is written there is only a part of the truth hidden in the shadows of history. The glamorous-looking life the saints live is actually quite demanding. Surely, you know this as well. Even if one is blessed materially, that alone will not give a peace of mind.”

Asyut stated this quietly, with a hint of pain. The meaning of those words was conveyed to Yuna to a painful extent. -That's right, she also suffered. Hadn't she become sick of the ceremonies which continued day after day after just a little while? She had thought that if this were to continue every day she'd lose her mind. And that's exactly what happened. She could understand just from thinking about it. Being separated from their parents at a young age and then brought up and treated as the personification of God. Their schedule for tomorrow and for several years after, even

their future marriage partner- yes, until their death, they were forced to live having all their affairs decided for them by other people. Was the fact that one's life was simply to be a symbol for others, that heavy and painful of a thing? It must have been very difficult to find daily happiness and a reason to live in such circumstances.

"That's right..... it hurts, huh. It really hurts."

"The First Holy Knight, like me, has it better in comparison. Being the saint's fiancé is decided when you are a child but, having said that, you receive an education that is equal to the common noble, and you are able to live an equal life. Once you become an adult, you are given the authority to participate in politics and the meaningful job of guiding this country. Even after marriage, you are able to have as many concubines serve you as you wish. However, the saint cannot be like that. The freedom granted to them is only a mere amount. In that situation, I believe it would be hard to maintain one's self."

Yuna looked down at the last entry in the book. Celiastina's name was not there.

".....I... How was I?"

Looking down, she mumbled that as if speaking to herself. The existence of the unrecorded Celiastina. That is to say, even now at this very moment, her suffering continued. She wasn't a person in the past.

Asyut pressed his lips together, but only for an instant, and then, after a slight hesitation, he faced Yuna as if he had made a resolution.

"I still remember very well the moment you came to this royal palace for the first time, Lady Celiastina. When I saw you, I thought that you were beautiful but lacked any amiability."

It was the first time she was hearing Asyut talk about how he saw the past Celiastina.

"However, I quickly thought that this was unavoidable. This young lady, who lived a life in a town, was suddenly sought after one day as the "saint" and was brought to the royal palace without knowing anything. In such circumstances, it is impossible to ask someone to act friendly to their surroundings. You had a tendency of directing a strong distrust to those around you, but as the days passed you gradually started to open up to the maids who accompanied you, and I thought time would open your heart."

“I got along with other people?”

“As soon as you were brought in, perhaps because you were irritated, you always glared at everyone and didn’t talk to anyone. But as the maids attended to you patiently, Lady Celiastina, you started to exchange idle chatter with them. You also started to accept the saint education that you had refused at the beginning and, little by little, you even attended the ceremonies. But then.....”

At that point, Asyut spoke evasively.

“The peaceful-looking life did not last many years. Once again, you gradually started to keep yourself at a distance from others. Perhaps the largest sign was when you suddenly dismissed all the people who attended to you. And then you began to frequently speak and act in such a way as to hurt the servants. That rapidly escalated to where you didn’t even mind ordering their deaths.”

“.....”

“The Holy Jail was also one such action. There are countless people who lost their lives to your orders, Lady Celiastina. You became a being that was feared by everyone.”

“Why did it become like that?”

“I do not know. Most likely, even now no one knows. However, there certainly seemed to be a strange point and, pursuing that, I asked you about it, Lady Celiastina. And then...”

“And then?”

Unconsciously, Yuna urged him to continue. At that moment, she noticed that Asyut’s face looked as if the blood had drained from it, and Yuna’s breath caught.

“–kgh!”

Asyut raised his right hand to his head and bent his head down slightly. Even in the dim light she could see that his hand was trembling.

“Asyut, I’m sorry, I made you remember something awful. It’s fine, thank you. All I do is ask people about things, and I haven’t tried to find anything out on my own.”

“No, that’s not it. You haven’t done anything wrong. It’s just that I’m still...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine so-“

Yuna instinctively reached out to Asyut. She didn’t think about how that would work out. Rather, thinking on it calmly, she should have known that it would be even more of a burden on him if she approached him, when she was the source of his distress. But Yuna was unable to stay calm. When Asyut grabbed both her hands to stand up, that was when she thought about this and hurriedly tried to get away. However, unexpectedly, Asyut didn’t release Yuna’s hands. Gripping both her hands tightly, he repeatedly took in deep breaths.

“Asyut?”

“Why. Why did you appear here in this form.”

“Huh? I didn’t hear you.”

“Why do you have to be a Lady Celiastina who lost her memories.”

“Asyut?”

While calling his name, Yuna wanted to cry. Asyut’s words, which she faintly heard when he gasped them out, made her dizzy. No, look at me, I’m a completely different person. I’m not Celiastina.

—No, she couldn’t let herself be taken in by those thoughts. She mustn’t.

Yuna swallowed those words which nearly came out.

“Asyut, I’m sorry I made you talk. Calm down. It’s really okay. You can talk about it when you feel like talking about it, okay?”

It was at the end, when Asyut expelled a heavy breath, that he released Yuna’s hands, which he had been holding. He nodded without any strength and then leaned back against the desk right behind him, as if he were sitting down on it.

“.....I apologize.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sorry too. I’m really sorry for having you come with me to this place.”

“There are no materials yet about you in this room, Lady Celiastina. Because you are not part of the past.”

“If you think about it that way, you’re right. I’m right here, aren’t I.”

Yuna smiled, but Asyut’s grim look didn’t collapse.

“.....In regards to you... there are other documents I would like you to see.”

“Documents you’d like me to see?”

Yes, Asyut nodded.

“However, they are not here and so I shall have them delivered to your room later..... I am still unable to tell you everything directly, but if this helps even a little...”

She wondered what documents he wanted her to see. Yuna wanted to ask about it here, but when she looked at how shaken Asyut was just now, she put an end to those feelings. To Asyut, the events at that time were a deep wound that had not healed yet. If just remember it caused him such pain then she didn’t want to force him to talk about it. But what she was clear about now was that “something” happened in the past between Celiastina and Asyut.

(And it’s something that makes Asyut lose his composure.)

In that case.

(It must be considerably painful for him to face me alone like this. There is no way someone can be calm in front of the main cause. And yet, he’s continued to endure it up until now.)

She was a complete outsider. She didn’t know anything about the deepest part of this problem.

(I wondered what happened... between these two.)

Right now, the person who was in the closest and most distant place to Celiastina, was Yuna.

By the time she returned to her room again, the sun was already sinking.

It was almost time for her last ceremony today to start. She should have been making preparations to leave her room, but she was idly watching the sunset until she noticed a knock and closed the window.

“Excuse me for interrupting your rest.”

The person who entered was Aeneas, with a slightly dark expression.

“Aeneas, is something wrong?”

“Um, please excuse my rudeness this morning. I was being intrusive.”

This morning? Yuna tilted her head. But then she immediately remembered what Aeneas was talking about. He meant the things he said during their walk in the gardens. Today was so hectic that she suddenly couldn't believe those events just happened this morning.

“Also, here. I was entrusted with this by Lord Asyut.”

Aeneas held out a book in his hand that had a black cover. Looking at it, the title was “The Record of Congratulations and Condolences”. If Asyut sent this over, that meant it was the document that he wanted her to see.

“This is...”

“A ten year list of the celebrations and deaths of those who are connected to the royal palace. All he said was to hand this over to you, Lady Celiastina.”

Yuna thumbed through the book, flipping the pages. There was a catalogue of the date, names, and contents of those who died.

(Why did he give this to me?)

Yuna looked down at the pages while feeling puzzled. At first glance it didn't seem like the usual record. However, if Asyut went out of his way to prepare this, then there was certainly something hidden somewhere. Yuna lowered herself onto the sofa and once again followed the order of entries. Somehow she managed to overcome her inclination to skip sentences and continued to patiently read the record.

“.....Ah.”

Finally, the onset of discomfort arrived. From several years ago to now, the records of funerals suddenly increased. In other words, in that year, there was a surge of deaths of those connected to the royal palace. That year was–.

(The year that Celiastina arrived at the royal palace.)

Yuna's brows drew together. There were many entries of "capital punishment" lined up. She didn't need to think about who passed down those orders.

Why did it become like this? Yuna thought about Celiastina and lowered her eyes. Was she satisfied with being able to easily extinguish a person's life with just one word? Did she have no regrets? –No, she must have had regrets. And that was why she chose to end her own life at the end. However, why was she unable to choose another path before it became like that? There must have been many possibilities, even if they were neglected and weak lights that had been abandoned. If she had just picked up any one of them, then everything might have been different.

"Is there something the matter with that record?"

Unable to stand being silent on Yuna's brooding expression, Aeneas softly called out.

".....Aeneas, you know too, don't you. That I've executed many people."

She felt like she could hear Aeneas' breath catch.

"The record of that time is left clearly here..... Why did I keep on taking people's lives over and over again?"

Celiastina, who was brought to the royal palace suddenly at the age of fourteen. Kept away from those she was close to, she was deprived of the future she might have imagined. Every day was a repeating monotony, and she found herself rapidly being deified. Did all these things pile up and break her? While other saints confined it within themselves, Celiastina started to attack the outside, and could not stop– in the end, turning the blade onto herself?

Yuna dropped her eyes to the record book again. This practical record, which showed no emotion, boldly put up Celiastina's sins.

(Huh? But...)

There was a sudden surge of deaths of the royal palace staff in the year when Celiastina entered the royal palace.

Yuna felt a strangeness at this fact.

According to Asyut, when Celiastina arrived at the royal palace she passed her time quietly at first, didn't she? On the contrary, she even began to open up to the maids close to her.

“Aeneas, did I start executing people the moment I came here?”

“Why are you asking about such a thing?..... In the first place, why did Lord Asyut prepare such a thing at this point in time?”

Aeneas' voice became somewhat lower.

“Please, tell me. It's very important.”

Aeneas' expression was stiff, as if he were thinking that Asyut was insinuating something by preparing this record book for Yuna. But she didn't have the leisure to correct that misunderstanding.

“Tell me, Aeneas. I want to know no matter what.”

In the end, Aeneas lost to Yuna's fierce look and did not pursue that any further. Perhaps because he was dredging up accounts, his gaze wandered.

“.....If I am not mistaken, I do not believe you did those things immediately when you arrived at the royal palace. They probably started to happen after two years had passed.”

Two years. Yuna was surprised by how it was a longer time than she thought. Then, what exactly happened to those people who died before that time?

(What does this mean?)

She checked the list again, and looked at those who died in the two years that Celiastina arrived at the royal palace. There were no entries of “capital punishment”.

(Celiastina didn't order them to be executed!)

She was stunned by that truth.

-Irufis Griole, maid, died due to uzirix disease. Age, 20 years old.

-Millias Haileska, maid, died due to falling from the east tower. Age, 17 years old.

-Sonia Ravine, royal palace teacher, died due to poisoning. Age, 48 years old.

-Paul Olga, royal palace cook, died due to falling down stairs. Age, 46 years old.

-Nadio Vidios, nun, died due to a heart attack. Age, 16 years old.

These were all the deaths that one could roughly say were unnatural in the first year. Everyone who died was still young. Moreover, they were people in positions which wouldn't be strange to have some kind of connection with Celiastina. However, as far as the deaths were concerned, it was hard to think that Celiastina was involved in all these deaths.

(Celiastina didn't kill them. But, could there be some kind of connection somewhere?)

She was certain that Asyut also noticed this strangeness. The question that he asked Celiastina might have been about this matter.

(And then, after that, the event that traumatized Asyut happened.)

Maybe it was dangerous to connect everything together like this? There was nothing to support it. But.....

"Aeneas, ever since I came here, people have been dying often, haven't they? Um, in those two years too."

Aeneas lowered his eyes, seeming to think a little, but then he shook his head to say that he didn't know.

"I apologize. At that time, I was ignorant to the conditions at the royal palace, and so I do not know much about such events."

That made sense. They were talking about things that happened four to five years ago. The people who would know, in detail, the circumstances at the royal palace were probably few in number.

Celiastina arrived at the palace, and soon impossible deaths started to increase. And then her merciless orders began. Then the incident that befell Asyut, and then Celiastina's attempted suicide.

(There must have been something that happened to become the cause of everything. Knowing that, I might be able to get closer to Celiastina.)

Who was the person who would know these?

The answer was found immediately. She couldn't continue to run away due to a personal awkwardness. In the end, it was impossible to avoid.

She would go and see Linus. And then she would talk to him.

Chapter Five

The nice weather continued and, even this night, she could see the stars glimmering beautifully in the night sky.

While walking back through the quiet corridors, she unconsciously looked up at the sky in fascination. The night sky, which could be seen past the breaks between buildings, was like a framed picture. Thanks to the full moon and the ceaseless amount of stars, the corridors at night were relatively bright. Even without the lights that dotted the length of the corridor, she wouldn't have been uneasy about her footing.

Doing something like walking alone this late at night was foolish, even she knew that. But still, Yuna slipped out of her room. Because she wanted to talk alone with Linus.

She heard casually from her maid, Nasha, that occasionally Linus left his room to stand in the courtyard at night. In the past, it seemed like Celiastina often stood beside him, and this sounded like a subject she shouldn't touch but since Nasha became her maid – and since Yuna became Celiastina's substitute – this hadn't happened even once, which was thought to be strange.

She didn't know if Linus was going to be in the courtyard tonight. If he wasn't there, then she decided she would visit him again tomorrow. Why she didn't just do that from the start was because, if she visited him in the middle of the night, she was hoping that Linus would take off his usual mask and show his true intentions a little.

Either way, she didn't have the time to relax. Of course it was dangerous for her to walk alone, but she didn't want anyone to see her actions as a rendezvous. And so, naturally, Yuna's pace quickened towards the gardens.

The royal palace had many places that were called courtyards, but this garden was comparatively small in scale. The scenery of the garden, where the moonlight stretched straight into it and how it was surrounded by the corridors, looked magical.

But, in this courtyard where only the faint sound of insects could be heard, she could not see the person she was searching for. She tried coming here on a chance, but it looked like she missed the mark. They hadn't arranged to meet here, so she had been too optimistic. Yuna's shoulders fell.

Right at that moment.

“Celia.”

Hearing a voice suddenly call out to her, Yuna’s body startled and then stiffened. When she turned around, there was someone standing in the hallway atrium.

It was Linus.

Realizing this, Yuna became flustered. She took a risk to meet him but, now that she was actually facing him, she felt nervous and guilty and her mind became blank.

“What are you doing here at this time? I was surprised when I saw you from my room.”

Linus approached the courtyard at a calm pace.

It appeared that their meeting wasn’t by coincidence, and that Linus had noticed Yuna and went out of his way to come and see her. Come to think of it, his room was close to the courtyard.

“Walking alone late at night... you’re being too careless.”

“I’m sorry.”

Linus gently draped the stole he had been wearing over Yuna’s shoulders. His actions and his voice were very kind and, before her surprise, Yuna felt an unbearable thought well up. He might be hard to deal with, but he was certainly a person she couldn’t hate.

“I... wanted to talk to you no matter what, Linus.”

“Talk?”

Yuna bit her lip and nodded. If she told him she wanted to learn about Celiastina, what kind of reaction would Linus show?

Either way, she couldn’t run away at this point.

“I was taken to the historical archive by Asyut today. There, I learned all about the personal histories of the saints up until now.”

Yuna, careful not to let her composed voice crumble, continued on.

“I had thought that though the saints looked glamorous they had it hard, but it was actually even more than that, right? Today, in those documents I saw, was the first time I learned that everyone suffered a lot. I’ve come to this point as the saint’s substitute without knowing anything.”

Linus remained silent and stared at Yuna.

“I really don’t know anything. Not even about Celiastina. And yet, recently, I’ve been passing the days feeling satisfied and not even trying to learn about anything in the first place.”

She had just pretended not to feel the aching guilt deep in her heart.

“–But, you know, now that I’ve had a chance to touch the history of the saints today, I feel like my head is a bit clearer.”

Yuna stared directly at Linus. His gaze, as she made contact, held no warmth and she suddenly felt like running away. But still, she overcame that, and she somehow ended up almost glaring at Linus.

“I want to learn more about Celiastina.”

She couldn’t say that she had completely gotten over her doubts and hesitation. But she had a feeling that learning about Celiastina was something no one else but her was supposed to pursue. However that was a completely other problem and, from the moment the ceiling painting of Rhodiani overlapped with Celiastina’s form, she regained her feelings of wanting to face Celiastina.

“Hey, Linus, when Celiastina came to the royal palace, there were too many people who died, wasn’t there? Moreover, there were a lot of people included who Celiastina didn’t order the death penalty on. What does that mean? Did something happen to Celiastina? What happened in the two years that she came to the royal palace? Linus, you would know a lot about Celiastina’s past, right? Please tell me.”

Her intent was to convey her honest feelings. There was no way bargaining would work with Linus and, in the first place, she didn’t have anything to bargain with. All she had were her feelings and right now there was nothing Yuna could do except for conveying those directly.

For a while Linus did not speak. Maybe he was looking for words to dodge around the issue? Or, maybe he was swallowing down words to refuse her. Either way, there was a silence that bit at Yuna.

“What will you do when you learn about Celia?”

Linus suddenly whispered with a smile.

“I have an interest, a pure one. By knowing Celiastina’s past, will that become a source of energy for you? Or for Celia?”

“I—“

Smiling, Linus shook his head and interrupted Yuna’s words.

“You don’t have to say anything. I can tell just by looking at you this time. –Hm, that’s right, then just as you wish I will tell you a little. It’s not the type of story that would replace a lullaby though.”

If only I had the Holy Mark on my neck.

There were many girls who dreamed such a thing. Being the only special person who was chosen in this world, being sublimely beautiful, and existing as someone who was blessed and worshipped by everyone and anyone. That was what the saint was to those girls. However, in actuality, they didn’t have such glamorous lives. There were as many arrangements and rules for the saint as there were stars in the sky, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that their lives were restrained. Even the Holy Mark that the girls longed for was a “rule”— it would disappear when death was close— and was this not a cruel fate?

Even at the very moment of the previous saint, Malveneska’s, premature death, the people accepted this fact calmly. At any rate, her death had been known since the Holy Mark disappeared several years ago, and everyone had resolved themselves.

However, it was impossible for people to have been prepared for the new saint to be absent for fourteen years—.

When news about how the long absent new saint had been found ran around the country, the people were first dumbfounded, and then immediately decided that it was nonsense. That was everyone’s first reaction.

During the fourteen years when there was no saint, the people started to live their lives seeing it as their last moments. Even the people who had been eagerly waiting for the saint at every moment ended up accepting their fates willingly or not. There were three times in history where ruin greeted them when a girl with the Holy Mark did not appear in fifteen years. And that was why everyone knew. That an overwhelming dark cloud hung over their futures. However, there was nothing they could do but know this. There remained only one road, to give up and accept their future- there was only that.

Under such circumstances, even if it was suddenly declared that the saint had been welcomed into the royal palace, it was natural that the people weren't able to accept that upfront. Inside the hearts of the frowning populace, the saint being "alive" was already long gone.

Then, what changed their minds? It was nothing other than the existence of the saint herself.

When Celiastina first appeared before the people, they were rooted to the spot by her mysterious beauty. No one was able to think that she was an ordinary girl that they could have passed on the streets just yesterday. Instead, she was like an angel sent by God, with a beauty that no sculptor could capture.

She didn't even have to show the Holy Mark on her neck. All the people rejoiced loudly, were in an uproar, and welcomed from the bottom of their hearts their goddess of salvation who had appeared at last. Celiastina did not respond to them directly but, just by existing as the saint, she became everyone's support.

Practically all the people in the royal palace who came in contact with Celiastina welcomed her. But because she had an atmosphere that didn't allow people to get close, they watched from a distance. Quiet and expressionless, no one knew what she was thinking about- that was how everyone described Celiastina in their hearts but, because she had been brought up to this age at an orphanage, the majority sympathized with Celiastina's attitude.

Yes, Celiastina was not a girl someone would ever hate. Actually, those who were in positions close to Celiastina wracked their minds on how to open her heart somehow. Whenever Celiastina showed the slightest expression of happiness, the maids would enthusiastically report to everyone that it was like obtaining 5 years worth of happiness. Whenever the tutor received a question from Celiastina, they would write

a proud letter exclaiming how she was such an excellent student. When Celiastina, who had picked at her food like a bird, ate all the cooking without leaving anything behind for the first time, the chef and all their staff would be extremely happy and act as if the food was high quality. Like that, Celiastina clumsily but gradually fit herself in with the people around her.

And then, at that time.

The maid who Celiastina had started to open up with died. She suddenly fell ill.

It was a maid who had never been sick with an illness to that extent before, and so everyone was surprised. She had been healthy just a while ago- those were ordinary expressions, but they could only say that to this sudden event. Celiastina also seemed to be shocked at her maid's death and, for a long time, was in low spirits.

However, that was only the beginning of these frequent and abnormal accidents in the royal palace.

After some time passed since the first maid died of illness, another maid fell and died from the top of a tower this time. Again, she was also a maid that attended to Celiastina.

That morning the maid had been ordered by the head maid to organize the garments of the previous saints, which were stored in the east tower. They thought that if they showed a few of these to Celiastina she would surely receive them with enthusiasm. At the east tower, where people seldom went, the maid appeared to have accidentally fallen when she opened a badly built window to air the place out.

Those who were visited by this type of "sudden misfortune" or "unlucky accident" and lost their lives began to appear little by little.

Of course it wasn't like these things didn't happen up until now. However, it was clear that the number was large. Everyone thought that because Celiastina interacted with many people, these events were an unmistakable heartache to her. Just when Celiastina had started to make friends in the royal palace, she started to create distance between herself and others again unexpectedly.

These abnormalities gradually began to settle after a year and a half. For a period of time, a whirlpool of uneasiness had enclosed the royal palace but once it calmed down there was no longer anyone who cared. From the start, those were accidental deaths

or deaths from an illness. It would be another story if they had died due to assassination but, if that wasn't the case then people decided there was no point in arguing about it. No, actually there was a small rumor that flowed about these "series of events that involved Saint Celiastina". Because the majority of those who died had contact with her. However, a sudden death by illness was something she couldn't have done and, above all, she herself appeared to be greatly pained by the deaths of those close to her. And so there wasn't anyone who deeply pursued that.

The situation was supposed to be settled without incident like that but-.

Celiastina suddenly acted.

She declared for everyone around who served her to be dismissed.

This order, which came like a bolt from the blue, greatly surprised not only the people who were dismissed by everyone around her too, and threw them into confusion. When asked about the reason Celiastina would never answer. The only thing she added were unreasonable and merciless words about how anyone who disobeyed her orders would all be executed.

If it was an order from the saint then it couldn't be ignored. As she ordered, all the servants that had even the slightest bit of interaction with Celiastina were dismissed. Everyone around Celiastina was replaced but this time she didn't open up to any of them, not even a little. Even when spoken to she would barely reply, and her expression would not move. What exactly Celiastina was thinking, no one was able to know.

"It was soon after that Celia started to pass down terrifying orders onto the servants. She would punish servants for trivial things, sometimes sentencing them to capital punishment. In those days, everyone trembled."

Linus continued to talk indifferently, as if it were none of his business.

"The reasons why Celiastina suddenly changed is probably something no one knew. No one could ask the person herself, and so time passed with that topic being something no one could touch. But, it wasn't as if there were no clues. Like you said, the suspicious deaths that occurred around Celia were not unrelated."

"And the one who noticed that was Asyut."

Linus quietly nodded.

“Asyut was one of the few people who acted seriously to calm Celia’s behaviour. Though, because the saint’s authority is absolute, Asyut would have to give in at the end, no matter what he said. That’s why he didn’t remonstrate her as a temporary measure and instead searched for the reason as to why Celia suddenly changed.”

“And so he turned to the many suspicious deaths..... Asyut thought that Celiastina did it herself, didn’t he?”

“I do not believe he was convinced, but simply that even if she didn’t do it then she might know something about those circumstances. He thought that if they could make clear the origin of those suspicious deaths then the fog that shrouded everything would clear.”

“Then Asyut went to ask Celiastina directly: what happened in the first place? And why did everyone who came in contact with Celiastina die one after another?”

Nodding, Linus was as calm as always and she was unable to sense how much of the truth he knew.

“And then what happened? Please tell me.”

“Celia didn’t seem to respond to that at all. Instead, an insane anger was laid bare, to the point where one wouldn’t have believed that up to now she had been emotionless. She accused Asyut quite a lot about wanting to say that she had killed them herself. While crying, she screamed and asked him why he would think she killed them herself. It was a voice that echoed through the royal palace.”

Celiastina had cried and screamed. What exactly did that mean?

“Celia didn’t forgive Asyut for doubting her. But he is the First Holy Knight and Celia’s future husband. So no matter what Celia said, in the end she couldn’t punish Asyut directly. For that reason, she did an even more crueler thing to him.”

“A crueler thing?”

Linus tilted his head to the side a little.

“That story won’t be told by me. Let’s simply say various things happened and, as a

result, Asyut's little sister was banished from the royal palace. His parents died when he was young, and so his sister should be his only family. Even now he seems to be searching for her secretly but, because of Celia's spread out gag order, her whereabouts are still unknown."

She was hearing this for the first time. She didn't know the fact that he had a little sister. Celiastina banished Asyut's sister, his one and only blood relative. To think that even such a thing had happened between them.

The distance between her and Asyut, which she had thought was closing little by little, opened up again at once. The bitter look on Asyut's face in the historical archive was brought back into her mind, and her heart hurt like something stabbed into it.

"Do you not know either, Linus? Where his little sister is?"

"I don't know. I tried a little research myself but, impressively, I couldn't find her. Really."

Celiastina's sudden change happened only a few years ago meant that the banishment of Asyut's little sister wasn't that long ago either. She was surely alive. And no doubt Asyut believed that as well, which was why he was still searching for his sister. Because he didn't show even a hint of this, Yuna could only imagine what kind of feelings he had while searching.

"I wonder why she had to do things to that point. What happened to Celiastina? What made Celiastina do that?"

If it was Linus then he must know about the event that happened to Celiastina. Because Linus was always by her side and watching over her.

".....Do you know about the "power" that is granted to the saints?"

Linus changed the topic abruptly. At least, that was what Yuna thought. Or was this topic connected? Unable to hide her dubious expression, Yuna asked back upfront.

"The "power" granted to saints?"

"The generations of saints were bestowed with mysterious powers that ordinary people did not have."

“I know about that. There was a saint who had prophetic dreams and one that had clairvoyance.”

All the saints had varying abilities. There were saints with surprisingly large powers and saints with modest powers which wouldn’t really be noticed in an everyday life. These “powers” were said to have played a role in the rise of the saints becoming a sacred existence.

“What does that have to do with Celias-.....”

Yuna, who had been speaking, was suddenly taken over by a question that arose.

Now that it was mentioned, this was something that hadn’t come to mind.

What kind of power was Celiastina endowed with?

Thud, her heart quickened loudly.

(Ah, again. I didn’t know even that.)

Up to now this topic hadn’t been raised even once, and so she didn’t even know that she didn’t know this. She hadn’t heard anyone gossip about it and it wasn’t published in the books she read. Yuna herself, in this body’s daily life, hadn’t felt any unusual phenomenons. Apart from being said to have an extraordinary beauty, there were no particular differences from an ordinary person.

Unable to find the answer in herself, Yuna looked up at Linus reliantly.

“What do you mean?”

Linus slowly opened his mouth. Yuna held her breath and followed the movement of his lips. But.

“.....ere.”

“Huh?”

“It seems someone is here.”

Linus looked behind Yuna and said this in a light manner. Yuna, following that, also

turned around but there was no one. However, the moment she thought that, if she stared she could make out a tall shadow approaching without any noise.

“N-Neisan.”

It was Neisan, who had not appeared ever since he had officially been appointed as her bodyguard. Having been careful about this or that with the people around her, she hadn't created an opportunity for him to guard her.

“Guarding the saint at this time, what splendid dedication.”

Linus said this in a manner where one couldn't tell if it was admiration or sarcasm.

“Did I interrupt?”

Neisan also answered with words that could be taken sarcastically, but in his position they weren't words to think deeply on.

“You hid your presence and waited so that you wouldn't interrupt, no? But it looks like you became tired of waiting. That's natural though, since your work hours have long past.”

“There was a suspicious shadow in this area of the royal palace and, being a little concerned, I took a look around.”

“A suspicious shadow, hm.”

“Please be at ease. I did not hear the conversation between the two of you. I saw a suitable time to call out and came closer, which was when you noticed me, Lord Linus.”

“Oh well, either way. Although Celia might not be happy.”

Being brought up when she was still taken aback, Yuna couldn't say anything.

“Lady Celiastina, should you not return to your room soon? I shall escort you.”

“Eh?”

At Neisan's proposal, Yuna looked up at Linus again before answering. However, Linus did not respond to Yuna's gaze and instead showed a challenging smile to Neisan.

“I’d like to escort her back but, unfortunately, I don’t have confidence in my physical skills. Well, I’ll leave it to you tonight. But if there was someone who was going to do something to Celia then, by the time they came, I would have acted. For example, even if there was a nefarious person who was hiding, they wouldn’t have any intention of acting at this point. Don’t you think so too, Neisan?”

She was worried about the hidden meanings in Linus’ speech. But Neisan did not respond to that.

“I cannot say for sure.”

“If that’s the case then don’t mind it. However, just to be sure... Celia, here.”

Linus removed the ring he was wearing and handed it to Yuna. It had a simple design with small, round gems. He had fitted it onto his little finger, but even if Yuna were to put it onto her middle finger it was large enough to have some leftover space.

“This is?”

“Please hold onto it until you return to your room. If something were to happen along the way, smash this on the floor. If you do that then a bright light will appear and people will gather immediately.”

Neisan was her bodyguard and so she wouldn’t need that. She should have said that. But Yuna could understand Linus’ intention. Linus was telling her to use the ring if Neisan were to make a move. He didn’t trust Neisan either. That was what he meant.

“.....Okay. But, I don’t think I’ll need it.”

“Of course, I think the same.”

Linus smiled as he said this without any embarrassment.

“Now then, good night, Celia. You can return that ring when you come again next time. I’ll be waiting.”

Was he saying that she had to come again if she wanted to hear the continuation of the topic? Yuna nodded vaguely and left with painful reluctance.

Although it was not a long distance, there was a little awkwardness in walking alone

with Neisan in the corridors at night.

Especially when, just a while ago, Linus showed a blatant caution towards Neisan. Nonetheless, it was undeniable that she herself was tightly gripping the ring that was given to her at that time. She noticed that she was also keeping a distance from Neisan for some reason.

That Neisan was walking a bit ahead of Yuna. Looking at that tall back, she wasn't able to tell what he was thinking..... In his case, even if she were to look at him straight on, it would be difficult to imagine what was in his head.

She wondered why Neisan appeared here. While being treated as a bodyguard in name only, he worried about the saint and took the initiative to patrol late at night. Was that really the truth?

-Hey, did you understand anything since then? About what is hidden inside of Celiastina.

If she tried asking such a question, how would he respond?

Whether the darkness of the night was messing with her thinking, incoherent and various thoughts appeared and disappeared. In order to break away from that confusion, Yuna gave a light sigh and stepped resolutely up to Neisan's side.

“I’m sorry for making you escort me at such a late time.”

“It is nothing. However, next time please refrain from going out alone.”

Neisan gave Yuna a glance.

“This royal palace is dangerous, perhaps more than you yourself think, Lady Celiastina. Duo was talked down, but it is best for you to think that there are still many more who will strike at you with anger. Because there are certainly more twisted and determined malices lurking.”

“By that, are you basically saying something is targeting me?”

Neisan did not answer. With pursed lips, he only dropped his gaze onto Yuna.

“We’ve arrived at your room.”

As soon as she thought to open her mouth again, they had already returned to her room. Neisan's expression, which was illuminated by the moonlight shining through a window, held no emotion as usual. However.

“Please rest tonight.”

—Ah, as she thought.

Yuna's heart was hit with a terribly out-of-place thought.

Under the moonlight, Neisan's eyes were... a beautiful amber.

Chapter Six

Asyut picked up a piece of the report that was spread out in front of him and then tossed it aside after a glance.

Unable to feel motivated, he stood up from the sofa and poured himself a glass of water from the shelf before draining it in one go. –As he thought, work wasn't something to be brought into his private room. Along with his sigh Asyut felt that keenly. But there was a mound of problems and they were all serious matters that could not be ignored. During the day he was up to his neck in dealing with business that the only way to think slowly over these problems was to set aside a short time at night.

The environment surrounding the Saint Celiastina was once again starting to change greatly.

There were many points related to her that he was concerned about. First, the most immediate problem was the matter of her bodyguards. Ever since Neisan, a victim of the Holy Jail, was announced as a candidate to be her bodyguard, everyone's doubts began to swell again.

The same situation occurred when Aeneas became one. Why did he expressly want to serve as the hated saint's bodyguard? Was he not hiding a plot to avenge himself? If that was not the case then, conversely, was the saint the one who appointed him as a bodyguard again? If so, then for what reason?

Certainly, the surrounding voices gradually became smaller as Aeneas did his work with devotion. From an outsider's view, the master and servant relationship was also favorable and, from the start, Aeneas' nature made it hard to associate him with shadowy actions like deceiving people for revenge.

But what about Neisan? Those who had knowledge of him, know him. Originally, he was a man whose specialty was gathering intelligence and assassination. Various factors, which happened in a row, led him to walking a path as a squire but, even if his title changed, he might still be acting behind the scenes of the royal palace as a "shadow".

(Just when everyone was gradually starting to accept her.)

Celiastina's existence.

She had been a saint who pushed the limits of cruelty but, since she lost her memories, her earnestness was certainly changing the atmosphere of the royal palace. That all her hard work would come to nothing was something that vexed Asyut.

Of course the problems weren't just the talks from their surroundings.

Currently, even Asyut did not know what Neisan's intentions were. He hadn't shown any noticeable movements so far, and his work attitude was as serious as always. But still, Asyut thought that he was certainly planning something. And yet.

(My head hurts.....)

What exactly was he really planning? The person in question had actually just visited Asyut's room. Once he said that he had something to report on Lady Celiastina, even Asyut was unable to coldly send him away.

What he heard was that, about an hour ago, Celiastina slipped out of her room alone. Furthermore, she met with Linus at a courtyard. In the past, he had heard that this frequently happened but for that to continue even now... there was something about that which made his heart noisy, but the problem was that her movements had been caught by Neisan from beginning to end.

Asyut had told several of his subordinates to keep a watch over Neisan's movements. That none of his subordinates reported anything meant nothing but that Neisan was able to circumvent them. This was exacerbating the impending danger and just as Asyut knew without a doubt that he couldn't leave Neisan as a bodyguard, Neisan continued to give a more detailed report in an indifferent manner.

There was a strange point to the two's conversation. They should have been talking about Celiastina herself and yet it was a very objective and calm talk. They treated her past and wrongs, and the circumstances that led up to her committing those wrongs, "as if it were the problem of a third person, who was not there" -.

He could understand that portion of Neisan's report. Neisan didn't know but Celiastina was currently experiencing memory loss. It wasn't strange that she was talking together with Linus about past events objectively in order to regain her memories.

However, at the same time, there was something that caught at Asyut.

Like Neisan mentioned, Asyut had also thought many times that Celiastina's speech and conduct was very much like a third party. It didn't feel like it was because she couldn't experience the emotions of her past with her memories lost. She could be seen as a completely different person, sectioned from the past Celiastina.

For example, it had been like that during the time they stood together in the flower field. When Asyut said they could come back next year to see the torch bugs together, she looked like she had been about to cry. She soon smiled and nodded but he was unable to forget the expression she just had. It was a look like she had given up somewhere and that she realized, next year, that it wouldn't be her who would stand beside him in that same place.

The current Celiastina was always standing at a distance one step away. Even though she focused on the future and dealt with everything positively, she didn't create a place for herself to belong in that future. It was as if she were intentionally thinking about distancing herself from there. They weren't the same. They weren't the same person. It was a completely different existence, not Celiastina.....

When he thought that, Asyut wondered if this was nothing more than a delusion from his own desire. In reality, it was an idiotic thought. The experience of falling down a cliff and nearly losing her life created another personality inside of her. Wasn't there a report that made such a conclusion to Celiastina's sudden change? But it was clear that it wasn't just him and that other people felt the same strangeness towards Celiastina. What was the truth?

During the time Asyut was thinking, Neisan silently watched Asyut. He might have expressly come here to report to Asyut, thinking that he might know something. He was hoping that, if Asyut knew the answer to that strangeness, then at least Asyut might show a reaction could be a clue.

If that was the case, then would Neisan's actions change depending on the answer? If he was personally out for revenge on Celiastina then, possibly, just knowing that she had no memories of those days might be a chance for him to give up. However, if he wasn't acting as an individual, and was acting as a member of an organization then-.

That was another large problem related to Celiastina.

Recently, the people who were driven out of the royal palace due to the past Celiastina's tyranny had gathered, and created an organization stating that they were

against the saint.

The existence of such an organization was known by them long ago. But it wasn't anything they needed to be concerned about, and so they didn't particularly do anything and left the organization alone. However, it seems lately that their numbers have increased and their unity has strangely strengthened. On one hand, there were written protests calmly distributed through towns, but it was said that recently there was an increase in people who carried arms and declared their intentions. Before they became a stronger organization, the royal palace needed to take measures.

And if Neisan was involved with such an organization then...

(As I thought, I had better remove him as Lady Celiastina's bodyguard, by force if needed.)

Just as his decision was settled alone.

“Asyut, you free?”

A loud voice was heard clearly through the door. It was the vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights, Siegcrest.

“Aa, the door's unlocked.”

Asyut replied to Siegcrest while feeling somewhat relieved. Noticing that he had deep furrows between his eyebrows, he pressed his right hand against his forehead and sighed.

Siegcrest entered the room in an easygoing manner. It seemed that he had finished his work already and thrown off his military uniform to change into his simple civilian clothes. Although he was armed with a sword, any one or two ruffians would be thrown to the ground and ended by his thick arms.

“Were you heading to bed?”

As he spoke he sat down on the back of the sofa as if it were a natural thing to do, but Asyut didn't bother rebuking him.

“No.”

“I see, that’s good.”

“So, what’s wrong?”

When asked, Siegcrest returned a silly “ahh” noise.

“I thought this place might be getting noisy again.”

It seemed like even Siegcrest was thinking the same things that Asyut was.

“On Neisan’s matter, the criticism from the outside must have gotten stronger again, right? Including Aeneas, they’re saying it’s strange that those two are acting as bodyguards for Celia.”

“That’s right.”

Asyut nodded.

“Those guys are doing their best but I also feel a bit sorry for them.”

“.....”

When he remained quiet, Siegcrest looked at him with searching eyes.

“You thought the same, which was why you let the two be bodyguards, no? Especially Neisan; this time I thought you wouldn’t allow it for sure.”

Of course, he had intended not to allow it. But he had been unexpectedly struck by Celiastina’s strong entreaty and went with that flow on the spot.

“And what do you personally think about those two? Particularly Neisan, and what he intends to do by coming forward as a bodyguard.”

Siegcrest, who was asked, twisted his large mouth and groaned.

“Yeah, I think it’s an actual problem and really suspicious. Personally, I don’t hate the guy. He’s certainly good at his work and a dependable subordinate. To the point where his direct supervisor entrusts hard jobs to him. But, when he unconcernedly completes his jobs, you don’t know what he’s thinking. He’s not easy to understand like Aeneas, though I’m also easy to understand.”

Really suspicious, huh. Asyut took those words down in his mind.

Siegcrest was thoroughly sweet to the people who entered his heart. He would often cover for or clean up after his subordinates' mistakes, and when his friends wanted to cut loose and drink he would more or less match their mood and accompany them, even if he was tired. However, despite being good-natured, his mind was different. He was able to judge things accurately and calmly.

"Actually, just a while ago, Lady Celiastina slipped out of her room alone."

"Wha?!"

"Neisan noticed that and escorted Lady Celiastina back to her room."

"Seriously?"

"Lady Celiastina was returned unharmed and without incident..... Do you still think Neisan is suspicious?"

Uhhh, Siegcrest scratched his head roughly.

"Looks like something absurd just happened. Well, but, even still he's suspicious. It was definitely an ideal opportunity to do something to Celia, and it doesn't make sense to let that go by. But, though we see it as an ideal chance, there might be reasons it wasn't for Neisan."

"Reasons it wasn't?"

"For example, it was an ideal chance to kill her there but maybe it wasn't time yet so he let her go. You could say the go sign wasn't given."

"Whose sign."

"You know already. Those anti-saint faction people."

Of course they would arrive here, huh. Asyut nodded.

"Well, anyhow, everything's nothing more than a guess. It could be that it's completely unrelated to the anti-saint faction and, while he was together with Celia, the poison in him was removed. Like you."

“What do you mean by that.”

Although Asyut replied like that, he was unable to strongly object.

“At any rate, there’s the thing with the bodyguards, but we need to keep our eyes firmly on the anti-saint faction and make a move. Rather, that one is more important right now. Apparently there was a brush with them close to the royal palace today. There was a Molotov cocktail thrown at the royal army’s office.”

“Was it unmistakably the anti-saint faction’s work?”

“They were kind enough to leave a letter claiming responsibility.”

As he thought, was the situation heading in a bad direction little by little? If it was just a thrown Molotov cocktail then it wasn’t something that Asyut and Siegcrest could publicly act on. The problem was that they held enough organizational power that their anti-saint controversies were gradually extending to the royal palace. Up to now, the anti-saint faction only had small activity in rural areas. However, when looking at their recent actions, their area of activity was definitely spreading. This was by no means preferable.

“I’m annoyed. We should move loudly and soon with our current forces and crush them in one blow.”

In reality, they were unable to grab the necks of the spies just from this skirmish. With Siegcrest’s spirited personality, it must be a terribly irritating thing.

“Well, anyway, the first thing is Celia’s safety. If she learns about the anti-saint faction she’ll surely trouble over this and that and move around. You’ll have to keep her in mind from here on too. That girl, even though she listens quietly and agrees to do what people say, she actually goes on alone all by herself. Sometimes you gotta take her by the hand and stop her.”

Asyut had a stifled and difficult expression.

“From here on, huh.”

At that murmur, Siegcrest looked at him blankly.

“Haven’t you already been watching over Celia? That’s why I’m saying to keep doing

that from here on too."

Siegcrest looked at Asyut's face with amusement.

"Or did you not plan to do that?"

"....."

Asyut did not answer and cast his gaze outside the window. Tonight was a cloudless starry night. This night sky was spread out equally above everyone and anyone. For some reason, Asyut thought that Celiastina might also be looking up at this wide sky.

Chapter Seven

The sky was high, Yuna thought.

A clear, cloudless, blue sky spread out this morning. Yuna took in deep breaths while still looking up. Recently she realized that whenever she was thinking, or troubled, she found herself looking up at the sky; somehow it had become a habit. It was a strange thought because she didn't do this before. It might have been because the sky was the only thing that hadn't changed since her previous life, and looking at it naturally calmed her down.

“Lady Celiastina, is something the matter?”

“Ah, no. It’s nothing.”

Aeneas was escorting her to the balcony that overlooked the plaza.

The Ceremony of Display was held here. Amongst the many ceremonies of the saint, this was the only one which allowed the general populace to participate in and so, naturally, the people’s interest were high, and even through the window she could see that there was an overflowing amount of people today too.

“Today it’s in the morning, huh. The Ceremony of Display has always been done in the evening.”

Because she was able to see the evening sun right when it was setting on this balcony, Yuna always looked forward to this ceremony. That’s why she felt a bit disappointed.

“It is because recently there has been a very large amount of people gathering in this plaza. During the evening, there are floods of men returning from work and housewives returning from shopping. And so it seems they are experimenting on holding this ceremony in the morning. If it is held during a period of time when everyone is busy, the crowd will also be somewhat relieved.”

“They thought about it that much...”

Yuna was honestly surprised. It’s true that there were a lot of people gathered at the

ceremony, but to think that it grown to such a scale as to require countermeasures.

“I feel like I can understand the people’s feelings. If I was a commoner, I would surely come every day without missing a single one. Because Lady Celiastina always waves her hand with a smile from the bottom of her heart. Everyone must be thinking that they want to see you again and again.”

Saying that, Aeneas smiled. Yuna thought that his refreshing smile, with no hidden shadows, was a more exemplary smile that would mesmerize people. Yuna thought this in her heart but because it was such an embarrassing line to actually say she kept quiet.

“However, this might be regrettable to them but I happened to overhear that the Ceremony of Display may be canceled for a while, because it is dangerous to have such a large amount of people in Lady Celiastina’s presence.”

“Really?”

This was extremely disappointing news to Yuna. The Ceremony of Display was the only time where she could come in contact with commoners- the side that she used to belong to. If even that was taken from her then Yuna would really lose contact with the outside world.

“However, this may be unavoidable. No matter how many physical searches are done at the entrances to the plaza, it is impossible to completely erase any danger”

Aeneas concluded this with a serious expression.

“Lady Celiastina, please come this way.”

When they arrived at the balcony, the priests who had already put in order the preparations lowered their heads reverently. It was a sight she always saw so she had gotten used to it, but if what Aeneas said was true then she might soon lose this everyday scenery.

At the prompt, she descended onto the balcony. Loud cheers burst out.

Every time she stepped out in this ceremony, Yuna would first stare and take in all the people. Of course she had feelings of wanting to respond to everyone’s emotions. But, at the same time, she was unconsciously looking for people she knew from before. And

then, every time, an alarm would ring in her heart telling her that she mustn't look. That's why she would raise her head and face the setting sun to quiet her heart.

However, just as she looked up from the plaza today the setting sun was nowhere to be found. Instead, the sunlight falling down from a higher place illuminated the people's expressions more and more clearly.

Yuna was slightly scared. If she really did see someone she knew then, at that time, she might end up not being "Celiastina" anymore. She would be standing in this place as "Yuna", a person who should no longer be in this world.

She knew, just from being scared like that, that she hadn't properly confronted herself yet.

Yuna tried waving her hand with all that she had, as if shaking off her anxiety. When she did so, the cheers of the plaza became even louder. She had to smile from the bottom of her heart. She had to deliver hope to everyone. Yuna told herself that this was the most important job she had to do right now.

At that moment.

The people's cheers suddenly changed to something strange, like screams or roars. Feeling an illusion like the ground beneath her feet was shaking, she inadvertently staggered. What on earth happened? Although Yuna lost her balance, being taken aback, there was a hand that supported her from the back. Turning her head, was that not Asyut standing close to her?

"Eh?"

Yuna's surprised voice was swallowed by cheers in the blink of an eye.

On the other hand, Asyut walked up to Yuna's side with a calm appearance and surveyed the plaza.

"What a large amount of people."

That's probably what he said. It was a situation where she barely managed to hear Asyut's voice, despite him being immediately beside her.

Yuna, with her mouth still open, stared at the side of Asyut's face. Why did Asyut come

to the Ceremony of Display? Up to now, he had never came to stand on the balcony with her. In the first place, the Ceremony of Display was always done by Yuna alone.

When Asyut raised one hand, the people's cheers in response crashed against them like a wave. Asyut never showed himself in front of the people unless it was a time of great celebration. This young man, who rarely appeared, was now waving his hand at them in an unexpected place like this. Just that and it was an event that was like a dream for the people gathered here, especially the young women.

Asyut looked at the plaza for a while before suddenly turning to Yuna and, with a tender action, took her right hand and raised it to his mouth.

A soft, gentle kiss was dropped.

Everything was done like a current. Yuna couldn't understand what happened in front of her.

Waah! The people's voices were deafening to her ears. But then it turned into the sound of a distant world. Only Asyut, who was facing her, felt terribly close.

“Occasionally, something like this is good, isn't it?”

This time she could clearly hear Asyut's voice. All of Yuna's senses were working hard to capture every single action and movement from Asyut. She did not even hear the surrounding cheers.



“Asyut.....”

It was whispered. Most likely, her voice didn't reach him but Asyut seemed to understand through the movement of Yuna's mouth that she was calling his name. His calm eyes invited her to continue.

“Why?”

Yuna tried to recover her right hand, which was still taken, but his strong grip didn't grant that.

“Shall we return?”

Asyut leisurely led Yuna back to the room, still taking her by the hand. The cheers of the people still sounded but Yuna was unable to pay any attention to that.

When they returned to the room and closed the balcony's doors, quiet was returned to the place all at once.

“I thought to have a short talk with you, Lady Celiastina, and so I came. As I was already here, I went out to the balcony to look at the people but it seems I surprised, not only the people, but also you. I apologize.”

Yuna chose the moment when Asyut's hold loosened to finally pull her hand back. She shook her head to let him know that it was okay, but her cheeks were still hot.

“We could speak here but...”

Asyut looked around the room. The priests, who were standing back, and the soldiers who were guarding them on the side started to prepare to withdraw.

“Let us take a walk and, at the same time, I shall escort you to your room. We'll talk there. Is that agreeable?”

“O-Okay.”

Yuna, who wouldn't have refused, nodded but confusion and uneasiness swirled around inside her. What did he want to talk about? Was it about The Record of Congratulations and Condolences? Did he want to ask her what she thought after reading it? Yuna probably noticed the same possibility that Asyut did in the record

book. But, she was a bit scared to say that in front of Asyut. His loss of composure in the historical archive suddenly came back into her mind.

“Um, Lord Asyut.”

Aeneas, who had been standing to the side of the balcony, took a step forward with a nervous face.

“Let me escort Lady Celiastina.”

“No, that’s fine.”

“But.”

“I said I had something to talk to Lady Celiastina about. You must have heard that.”

“.....Yes, it’s just-“

“You’re dismissed.”

Asyut decisively pushed aside Aeneas’ words. His manner of speaking wasn’t to the point of an order, but there was a pressure to his tone that made it hard to disobey.

Aeneas did not reply. He sank into silence but barely lowered his head and took one step back. Yuna was the one who felt a chill at Aeneas’ reaction, which clearly showed that he did not accept this.

“Shall we leave, Lady Celiastina?”

“Mm.”

Following Asyut, who started walking, Yuna was led by that back. As she passed Aeneas she sent him a glance, and nodded to tell him that it was okay. Aeneas watched Yuna leave with a pained look.

“Aeneas appears to treat you with great care.”

Exiting into the corridor, the first thing Asyut said was surprisingly about Aeneas.

“Yes, that’s right. He’s very nice.”

Yuna, who thought that she would quickly be dumped with the topic on Celiastina, quietly let out a relieved breath. She was managing to walk somewhat behind Asyut, but she felt like she was relaxed enough now to think about walking beside him. Asyut, who seemed concerned about Yuna, slowed his walking speed a little.

“He seems to treat me like an enemy though.”

“That’s not true. He’s just worried about me.”

Saying that, Yuna suddenly closed her mouth. Those words were implying that Asyut’s invitation to Yuna was something that would cause worry to others.

“He might be better suited as the First Holy Knight, hm. For the people, and those in the royal palace..... and for you.”

“I’ve never thought that way.”

This was the truth. It wasn’t that Aeneas couldn’t do it, or that she didn’t like Asyut. It was that she didn’t have the right to wish, let alone the right to choose. –It was not her, who was here now, that really had a future.

“You’re making that face again.”

“Eh?”

At some point, Asyut was staring intently at Yuna’s face.

“The more I stay by your side..... the more I am unable to understand you.”

What did he mean? Yuna turned over Asyut’s words in her head but she didn’t really understand what he just said. She felt like asking what kind of face “that face” was, but the atmosphere didn’t seem to allow that.

“Last night, you slipped out of your room alone, didn’t you.”

Despite how Yuna was worrying alone, Asyut changed the topic all of a sudden.

“I received a report from Neisan.”

Yuna stiffened, at a loss for words. Not seeming to care about that, Asyut continued on

in a quiet manner.

“Please refrain from actions that will shorten my life. This is not the first time that you suddenly disappeared. This time, I learned about the matter after everything was settled but I was still quite alarmed.”

“I’m... sorry.”

Yuna said an apology in a quiet voice. She was sure that there was a double meaning in Asyut’s worry. Like he said right now, she had slipped out of her room late at night. There she’d been found by Neisan and had to be taken care of by him. And, especially in the latter’s case, she had been told sternly for a long time not to be alone with Neisan, and so there was no excuse to make.

“The royal palace is not perfectly safe. Especially from here on, you will need to be cautious. It may make you feel stifled, Lady Celiastina, but you must exercise prudence.”

“Especially from here on...?”

After hesitating a little, Asyut opened a serious mouth.

“Presently, the faction that has adopted an anti-saint rhetoric has created an organization and is moving.”

Ah, Yuna raised her voice. It immediately came to mind; the true identity of the “twisted and determined malices” that Neisan spoke about the other night. There was no doubt that was the organization that Asyut was talking about right now.

“Its core was formed from the people who were driven out of the royal palace. Their opinions are already standing on their own and steadily growing larger. Of course the royal palace does not intend to leave them at large, however the time is not right to subjugate them. And this time when we are standing and watching is, to them, an unparalleled opportunity.”

“What’s the aim of the people from the anti-saint faction?”

“To eliminate the worship given to the girl with the Holy Mark who is called a saint, and to consolidate the power of the priests to the royal family. They are firm in their principle of a monarchical system. And, in order to acquire a foothold to make that a

reality, they are planning to overthrow the current saint first. If I may say this without mincing words, they are aiming for your life. Even if the loss of saint will cause a calamity, they believe it would be a trial for them to overcome.”

I see, Yuna accepted Asyut's words with a strangely calm feeling. Perhaps Duo was nothing more than a corner of the iceberg. It was natural that he was not the only person who held a grudge against Celaistina. There were still many who hadn't raised their voices, but smouldered with the same feelings.

“There is no guarantee that there are not people within the royal palace that are in league with the anti-saint faction. Therefore, please, be more careful than you have been up to now.”

“Okay, I understand.”

“.....However.”

Asyut suddenly stopped walking. Yuna copied him and then followed Asyut's line of sight when he raised his head. Before she knew it, she could see on her right side the courtyard that Linus and her had talked in late at night.

Coming in the daytime showed that it was a very modest courtyard. To the point where one might have called it an inner garden instead. The way the moonlight had shown into the garden had been impressive, but right now in the brightness its surrounding corridors were familiar and it was buried as another part of the scenery.

“Was it because I brought you The Record of Congratulations and Condolences that made you sneak out from your room late at night to speak with Lord Linus?”

“.....That's...”

It was certainly one reason, but it wasn't something that Asyut had to feel responsible for.

“It was careless of me to have done that and involved you. Particularly the Record of Congratulations and Condolences, which I needn't have shown you.”

“I asked you to tell me though. I'm sure that, even if you hadn't shown me the record book, I would have acted. But I might have been late in noticing many things.”

Even now, she didn't know what to do with her own feelings, and it was hard to move forward. But still.

"Wait a little longer. I'll definitely find it."

The truth of the lost past.

".....Please do not do anything reckless."

When Asyut gave a somewhat sad smile, he abruptly lowered his eyes and gently scooped up Yuna's right hand. Asyut's thumb softly rubbed the shining ring on Yuna's middle finger.

(Ah.)

That was the ring Linus left with her. Thinking that she would return it if she ever met him somewhere incidentally, she hadn't thought deeply about putting it on her finger. A ring for self-defense, that was all it was, and yet she felt the urge to get rid of it from her hand and Asyut's sight.

"Come to think of it, I am always running after you. Even so, sometimes I find it unbearable when I notice one side of you, you who I cannot understand..... But I'm certain that, from here on too, I will continue to run after you."

Yuna, caught by the heat of Asyut's fingers, was unable to move for some time.

The transparent jewel set in the center of the ring sparkled.

Yuna, who was spinning the ring around with her fingers and feeling that sensation, suddenly gripped the ring tightly at a thought.

Asyut's pained expression wouldn't leave her head. Before she knew it, she was always thinking of him.

Yuna was sitting on the sofa in her own room and holding her knees.

Whenever she was alone, she somehow felt disheartening. Burying her face into her knees, she tried hard to endure the loneliness. This large and cold room was the only place for Yuna to belong. She couldn't leave this place and she couldn't stop being the saint. She wasn't allowed to like someone or confess her feelings.

The “loneliness” that she hadn’t been feeling recently was just now, in this moment, felt keenly. When she asked her own heart why she was suddenly trapped by this anxiety, she noticed Celiastina’s shadow silently lurking there. Ah, this was also Celiastina’s feelings. Perhaps the past Celiastina had also sat on the sofa in this room and held her knees in the same way.

(I’m sorry, Celiastina.)

This body and life was not her own. How many times had she told herself these words? And yet, Yuna’s mind was still unable to swallow this simple fact.

The image of the goddess Rhodiani, which Ron had told her about, came to mind. The Rhodiani inside of her was looking over her shoulder and searching for her own self. One day it would catch up, and maybe it would take over this body entirely like some kind of demon.

Yuna held the ring up, which she had been clenching, in front of her eyes.

(Let’s see Linus again.)

And they would continue the story about Celiastina which had been interrupted. She was going to look for Celiastina’s past so that the Celiastina inside of her would not become a distant thing.

As soon as she had her maid, Nasha, confirm Linus’ schedule, she received a message that said “I’ll be waiting for the ring”. So, Linus intended to continue the story too. She couldn’t let this opportunity escape. Yuna instantly started preparing to visit him.

It’s been quite some time since she last visited Linus’ room.

Whenever she came here it was mostly to make a request, and so naturally her body became tense and nervous. But still she pulled herself together and when she knocked on the door a light response came back, telling her to come in.

“.....Excuse me.”

She timidly opened the door. When she peered inside Linus, who was sitting on a sofa, closed the book he was reading.

“That was quick.”

Sit, Linus said as he gestured at the seat facing him; Yuna did as she was told and also sat down on a sofa.

“First, here’s the ring I borrowed, Linus.”

“Aa.”

When Linus accepted the ring, he smoothly caressed the jewel and then brought it up to the edge of his lips.

“It seems there were no opportunities to use it. I’m glad.”

He was talking about using the ring to call for people if Neisan attacked her.

“Or should I still lend it to you?”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Hm, that’s right. Asyut wouldn’t be amused at seeing you, his fiancée, wearing the ring another man gave you.”

He spoke as if he had seen something. She tried to smile but her face was stiff.

“What? You’re making a strange face. Did you fight with Asyut again?”

“W-We didn’t fight. I made a promise with Asyut. That I will definitely find the truth about Celiastina.”

Yes, today she wouldn’t let herself be mislead by Linus’ words. When Yuna declared her thoughts, Linus’ laughing expression slowly tightened.

“.....That’s right, you two have the right to know.”

Saying that, Linus’ eyes suddenly had a dark color in them.

“It is not a long story. Nor is it a difficult one. But, because it’s simple, it tells of how there is also cruelty in this world.”

Yuna felt like she was being sucked into Linus’ deep eyes.

“Let’s stop all deceptions or dodging. There is also no need for an introduction. You find this best too, right?”

“.....Mm.”

Linus watched how Yuna nodded while holding her breath before he opened his mouth again.

“The past suspicious deaths that happened frequently at the royal palace were, like the quiet whispers said, not tragedies caused by accidents. –Everything was caused by the “ability” that Celiastina has as a saint.”

“Ability.....”

The saint’s special power. Yuna turned over Linus’ words in her mind.

She remembered that he brought this topic up before. The saints were bestowed with various strange powers, and were worshipped by the people for that reason. However, she had still been left in the dark as to what power hid in Celiastina. It seemed that saints who had the Holy Mark had some sort of ability, but what exactly was the relation between that power and Celiastina’s cruel behavior?

“Celiastina’s ability is...”

Her heart beat fast. Not being aware of it herself, Yuna clenched her hands on her knees, gripping her one-piece dress.

“Amplifying the “death” of those she has connected with.”

Linus quietly stated.

It was a tone that suppressed any emotions to the best of his ability.

Yuna gripped the one-piece dress in her hands even harder. Harder, and harder, uncaring if there would be wrinkles. Other than that, her body didn’t move. It took a long time for her to digest Linus’ words.

–Amplifying the “death” of those Celiastina connected with.

Yuna murmured those words once more in her mouth. But even then it was no good.

Her mind blanked, like it burst open, and she couldn't think well. She repeated the same words to herself over and over again.

Something spread through inside Yuna. What was this feeling? Yuna wondered absently. Fear? Anger? Sorrow? She couldn't decide on any of them, but the closest feeling might have been revulsion.

Yuna closed her eyes. And she clenched her teeth, as if to bear the pain.

Ah, so it was like that?

With that single phrase from Linus, Yuna understood everything.

Why the people around Celiastina died. Why it was only the people who accompanied her and were close to her. Why it was the people who Celiastina opened her heart to, when she had been stubbornly closed off when she was suddenly brought to the royal palace.

“.....When did it become like this.”

“Most likely from the start. That's how a saint's ability works.”

Contrary to Yuna's hoarse voice, Linus' voice was calm and did not break.

“However, it seems Celiastina too was unaware of her own ability when she first came to the royal palace. Of course, she realized it one way or another. Initially, she was more cautious than needed about the people around her because, before she arrived at the royal palace, people who were close to her often died. She was scared that the same would happen here and people would die.”

Things had been well when she had been cautious. But she opened her heart to those who watched over her warmly, and at that moment--.

(Why.)

“By the time she was completely aware of it, two years had passed since she arrived at the royal palace. At that time, Celia was in such a terrible state that I could not bear to see it. She shut herself away in her room and wouldn't come out before going on a rampage. There was nothing we could do to stop her. She wrecked the room, herself, and others. How many times was she made to drink a sedative? When we thought she

finally stopped her rampage, she ended up becoming like another person. –Not her appearance, but her heart. She died in that moment.”

Yuna tried to imagine the situation at that time, but was unable.

“From then on, Celiastina behaved ruthlessly so that she would not connect with anyone.”

In order not to kill people, she had to hurt them. And that was the same as hurting herself. For a time, Celiastina had persisted on acting cold to distance herself from others, but a gear in her mind fell out of alignment. That faulty gear rattled dully, and continued its unstable rotations–.

“Finally, Celiastina took the initiative and began to murder people. That girl must have forgotten the very reason as to why she had distanced herself from others. There was no reason or meaning in executing people. There was only killing.”

It might have been a salvation to her if she had been completely insane. But Celiastina was unable to “go crazy”. The faint sanity inside of her ate into her heart more and more. Why did it become like this? Why was she endowed with this ability? For what reason was she born? For what reason was she still alive?

(That's why Celiastina chose to end her own life, huh.)

The last act from her sanity.

However, in the end, the heavens would not accept even that.

Linus nodded solemnly as his words continued.

“If Celiastina will truly return, I have been wondering what will become of her. Of course her ability will be removed, right? If not, then she will simply repeat the same suffering. What meaning is there in that.”

Yuna tried to recall the events of that white world that she could no longer remember clearly. That strange “light” had said nothing about this ability. Didn’t they say something along the lines of her needing time? Did they mean that it took time to remove this abominable ability? It had to be that, Yuna thought.

“.....But, even if that ability was removed...”

Linus muttered this and leaned back deeply into the sofa.

“Let us suppose that Celiastina will return mentally stable. At that time, will Celia really be able to fit in with her surroundings as if nothing had happened?”

Yuna’s words were stuck.

“Of course, the people around her will be doubtful that she changed, but that was a wall you overcame. As long as the person herself has the motivation, then it is not impossible to have her surroundings accept her once again.”

However there is another problem, Linus pointed out as he continued.

“If her sanity returns, then I believe she won’t be able to bear the weight of the crimes she committed. Celiastina killed too many people without reason. That fact will not disappear, no matter what. The more sanity a person has the more that person would be unable to accept turning their back to those crimes and returning to a comfortable daily life with an ignorant face.”

“That’s—“

“I’ve also thought that perhaps letting her sleep like this would be a happiness for her. And, actually, for the people around us... and for you. An option might be you living like this as Celiastina.”

For an instant, the shock that stabbed into her chest caused Yuna to lose her words.

To think that Linus would say those words. He was the only person who knew that a separate person resided in this body, and he was the only one who had been negative to Yuna’s existence.

“Linus, are you thinking that it’d be better for Celiastina not to return?”

“It’s not about my feelings.”

“Let me hear your feelings, Linus. How do you feel? What do you think?”

“There are other things more important than what I think. For example, your own feelings. You worked hard and struggled alone and unassisted up to this point, can you really consent to leaving this world upon Celiastina’s return?”

“Stop, don’t say that!”

Yuna shook her head like a mute child.

“Linus, you aren’t going to abandon Celiastina, right? That’s what I want to hear.”

She wanted him to say clearly that he wouldn’t abandon Celiastina. With that, Celiastina and herself would surely be saved. Certainly, it might be painful for Celiastina when she returned, but if she had someone beside her supporting her then she would be able to endure. It was the same for Yuna herself. Just by having someone waiting for Celiastina’s return, Celiastina would be able to feel cheered up. And yet.

Linus did not answer.

“You are too good. You’re an earnest and model person. I think you can be more selfish.”

Linus’ smile was tired. At that, a strong shadow fell on Yuna’s heart.

The truth about Celiastina could be called nothing else but a shock.

She knew that Celiastina wasn’t just a horrible person through and through, and that there was some sort of circumstance. But to think that such a merciless truth had been concealed.

(O’ God, why did Celiastina receive such a cruel ability?)

What was the reason for that ability. Wouldn’t this power produce nothing but despair? And despair, once born, was like a chain that steadily grew. It was connected so easily to a feeling of “loss” in this world. Even if that power was withdrawn at this point, or if things could be done over again, the hearts that were injured would continue to hold onto their unhealed pain.

Yes, from the start, Celiastina might not even think about wanting to do things over again. Perhaps that was what Linus wished to say.

(That might be reasonable too.)

Linus’ faint smile as he called Yuna a model person came to mind. She had moved along to the will of that strange “light” without any dissatisfaction or doubts – though she

could only do that to the best of her ability – and steadily walked towards the end. Had she been chosen by the “light” to be Celiastina’s substitution because she was the most suitable and convenient puppet to manipulate, rather than the overlapping time of them losing their lives?

She thought she had gotten to this point on her own will. But was that not the case? Had everything been arranged? For the young girl called Yuna to become Celiastina and to crawl out of her dilemma one step at a time. To make one or two friends and then, at the end, disappearing quietly without a complaint.

Yuna returned back the way she came, staggering on unsteady feet.

Aeneas followed several steps behind. Nasha had called him when Yuna was heading towards Linus’ room. Aeneas watched Yuna with concern but he did not speak or support her body; he simply kept silent by her side.

However, when Yuna was drawn into the opposite corridor to the path back to her room, Aeneas was unable to stay quiet at that point.

“Lady Celiastina, where are you heading? Your room is to the left.”

“Mm, there’s someplace close... I want to go to.”

She wanted to see Asyut again.

Yuna tried to walk down the corridor calmly but in truth, even now, she wanted to scream. An unrestrained whirlpool of anxiety and confusion rapidly grew larger and larger in Yuna.

Celiastina had been in constant pain. There was a crushingly great ability in such a slender body – it was a concealed curse. Hey, what should I do? Linus said that not returning might be Celiastina’s salvation. But is that true? Will Celiastina really be happy not returning? –Ah, why is there such painful things. I... I... what should I do? What’s the best thing to do?

She tried throwing all her confusion at Asyut, who wasn’t there. But, these overflowing emotions continued to well up one after another and she felt like they could escape outside at any time.

“Lady Celiastina, you don’t look well.”

Aeneas, who seemed to decide that it was not a good idea to continue watching her silently, grabbed Yuna's right hand and forced her to stop walking. Yuna's body swayed but she only turned her head to look back at Aeneas.

"I... want to see Asyut."

The instant she said that, a shadow suddenly fell over Aeneas' face.

"Could you talk to me instead? I'll do anything. So, please, rely on me too."

"No, I need to see Asyut. It has to be Asyut."

"Why? Why am I not good enough?"

Aeneas' right hand tightened its grip.

"It's not that you're not good enough, Aeneas, that's not what I—"

"To me they're the same thing."

Aeneas' voice, which interrupted Yuna's words, was heard awfully close. Ah, the moment she thought that, Aeneas had already pulled her into his arms.

"Ae—"

Yuna was so surprised that she could not even call his name, and she could only be pressed against Aeneas' shoulder. His arms immediately went around her back and he held her tightly.

Aeneas' arms and chest were hard. He was a man. For a moment, when she was aware of that, Yuna became embarrassed and blood rose to her face.

"Let me... go..."

When she begged him in a shaky voice, his shoulder jolted and stiffened. At the same time, Aeneas' arms loosened and she was released. Hurriedly pulling her body back to create difference, she looked up and saw something like pain leap onto Aeneas' expression.

"I apologize....."

Aeneas murmured this lowly.

“I-It’s okay.”

Yuna was still unable to dispel her confusion but she felt like she had to say that, and then she shook her head awkwardly.

“–What is going on here.”

The moment Aeneas opened his mouth again to say something, another voice broke in between them. When she turned around, she saw Asyut coming towards them from a corner at the end of the hall.

“A-Asyut. Why are you here?”

“Lady Celiastina, I heard that you went to Lord Linus. I became a bit curious and came for you.”

As Asyut stated that, there was a faint annoyance in his appearance.

“Come to think of it, I am always running after you”– she remembered Asyut’s words. “I’m certain that, from here on too” and just like he said here he was coming to her.

Unconsciously, Yuna released a breath.

“Um, thank you for coming all this way. It just so happens that I was thinking of going to see you too.”

And then she turned to Aeneas, trying her best to act like nothing happened.

“Aeneas, I’m sorry. But this is related to a personal problem, so..... Thank you for everything up to this point.”

Many excuses wanted to come out, but Yuna managed to clamp down on them. Anything she said would sound like an excuse, and he himself said that they meant the same to him. Even Yuna could understand vaguely the feelings that Aeneas was frustrated about. However, she didn’t have the composure yet to confront Aeneas.

“No, I’m the one who should be sorry. I apologize for my rudeness.”

Aeneas whispered that in a quiet voice without raising his head and then, without saying anything more, turned on his heel and departed. Yuna wanted to call out and stop him reflexively, but somehow she managed to swallow her words. As she watched Aeneas' back like that for a while, she noticed that Asyut was looking at her instead of Aeneas, and so she hurriedly turned back to Asyut.

"Well, what did you wish to speak to me about?"

"U-Umm. If possible, let's talk in a place where people won't come. I don't really want others to hear this."

Understood, Asyut nodded, before showing slight hesitation.

"How about my office then? If I send people away, then no one will enter."

"Okay. Then, please excuse me."

Asyut started to walk at an easy pace. Yuna, who watched his back, followed after him.

It wasn't that Aeneas wasn't enough, it was that it had to be Asyut. Once again Yuna realized strongly that she felt relieved just from seeing his tall back. How long could she keep walking behind him like this? No matter how she estimated, it would be around half a year. Or perhaps she might have nothing more than a month.

Like Linus said, if she was able to continue living as Celiastina in the future, would Asyut accept that? And, would he allow her to stay by his side until they grew old together?

(But, even if Asyut allowed that, would I allow that for myself?)

Her fragile heart was uncertain, like a tower built on sand. As the waves continued to break along the shore, would it not collapse all too soon?

Yuna quietly stretched out her right hand to Asyut's back.

If she grabbed his clothes like this, clung onto Asyut when he turned around in surprise, and cried out that she didn't want to think about anything anymore and just wanted to be by his side... what would he do?

(It's another "what if" again.)

Yuna's hand cut through the air and dropped down like that. -She couldn't. She mustn't.

At that moment, Asyut suddenly turned around and Yuna unconsciously curled her shoulders in.

"Are you well?"

"Y-Yes."

For a moment, she thought he saw straight through to her doubts and how she was caught by selfishness. Asyut sent a concerned gaze at Yuna, who nodded immediately with a head that wasn't working.

"Let's walk side-by-side. I feel uneasy when I can't see you."

A large hand was placed on her back very naturally. Yuna's heart quickened.

"Am I that unreliable?"

Yuna tried smiling to hide her nervousness, but Asyut did not return the smile.

"Your complexion is very bad. You look like you'll collapse at any moment."

Just when she was about to answer that she wasn't, she tripped over an uneven place on the floor. Yuna managed to hold herself up somehow, supported by Asyut who stretched out both hands without a moment's delay.

"S-Sorry."

Yuna apologized quietly in her mouth, so embarrassed that she couldn't raise her head. She was really pathetic. Getting her feet tangled in front of someone is obviously going to cause them to worry. At the very least, so that she wouldn't have any more accidents, she would concentrate solely on walking.

Supported by both of Asyut's hands, which hadn't left, Yuna told herself strongly that she shouldn't be afraid of losing these hands.

Asyut's office was as neat as usual and there was nothing unnecessary in it.

A maid immediately brought them tea when they sat down in the sofas. As Asyut told the maid to the side not to allow anyone to enter for some time, Yuna quietly raised the glass to her mouth. It was cold and delicious. It calmed her feelings somewhat. With this, she'd be able to talk to Asyut calmly.

“Well, now that we’re here...”

Asyut, who was seated facing her, opened his mouth reservedly. Yuna gave a small nod and set her glass down.

“Um, you see, I just spoke to Linus.”

She drew in a light breath.

“I asked about the reason for Celiastina’s- the past me’s sudden change.”

Asyut’s eyes widened slightly.

“Did Lord Linus say?”

“Mm. He said we had the right to know. That’s why I wanted to talk as soon as possible. When I heard what he had to say, I became confused, and now I don’t know what to do.”

“.....”

Asyut kept silent. No, maybe he lost his words.

“.....May I ask what he said.”

Even then though Asyut asked in a resolute voice.

Yuna nodded firmly once more, and then opened her mouth again.

“It’s not a complicated story, which is why it’s cruel. Is what Linus said.”

And it really was that, Yuna thought.

“Each and every saint is granted a special ability, right? I’m not an exception either, and I have an ability bestowed by God.”

“Yes, that is right, but your ability, Lady Celiastina, has never been alluded to until now for some reason. I know nothing with respect to your ability.”

“I believe not many people know. Even the past me didn’t seem to realize until the time I came to the royal palace. In the end, maybe Linus is the only one apart from me who knows. Well, maybe the king or trusted people too.”

“Is this ability connected to why you changed, Lady Celiastina?”

She could see Asyut’s clasped hands tighten.

“Mm. I think it had a lot of impact. Because Saint’s Celiastina’s power is- to amplify the “death” of a person she has connected with.”

Yuna declared this all at once and then, unable to bear it, lowered her eyes. She couldn’t look at Asyut’s face directly. What kind of expression would he have now that he knew the truth about the saint that he had been chasing for forever. Would he be like her, who hadn’t been able to swallow the truth well and was dazed? Or did he lose his bearings and was feeling emotions that could not be named, and were neither anger or sorrow, welling up inside of him?

“.....A power directed to the “death” of those she has connected with... Then, the sudden increase of suspicious deaths was due to this ability?”

At Asyut’s calm voice, which was beyond her expectation, Yuna timidly raised her head. But, contrary to his calm voice, there was a complicated expression on his face. Asyut’s clasped hands tightened their grip even more.

“Yes. Being suddenly taken to the royal palace, I was full of anxiety, and then the people I opened up to..... Only those people died one after another, which is when I appeared to become aware of my own ability. Knowing that I was the cause, I became desolated. And then tried to keep away from people but that just escalated more and more.”

She was unable to say anything about what happened later. Amongst the countless people caught by Celiastina’s vicious ways, as she became filled with a quiet madness, included Asyut himself.

Linus said there was no meaning as to why Celiastina started hurting people. But was the truly the case? Could a reason not be found there? For example, if Celiastina had wanted to get away from the cruel truth even for just a bit.

Opening her heart, and then having her precious people – who she opened up to – being killed by her own ability. Had she not been constantly pursued by this inescapable fact? Even if she tried her hardest to look away, she was unable to avoid this. Like a drop of black ink on white paper, this black stain would never disappear, and instead would leap into someone's eyes even more vividly. If Celiastina had been unable to endure that black glare, and had thought to dye the entire paper pure black–

“The subject that I asked Lady Celiastina about was, evidently, a topic to be avoided with her, huh.”

Perhaps he was thinking the same thing, Asyut said this quietly.

“It must have been a problem that she never wanted anyone to touch. And that's why she did such brutal actions, she had lost that much self-control.”

Asyut's complexion was not well, maybe because he was remembering those days.

The thing Yuna still knew nothing about; the discord between the two.

“And then what did Lord Linus say?”

“Linus said...”

Yuna looked down a little and, during that motion, brushed a loose strand of hair away with her right hand. At that, her body shuddered. This hair and these arms were not her real body. And they absolutely couldn't be hers. She mustn't do that.

“Linus said... that it might be a choice to remain like this.”

Her voice was hoarse. Even this voice wasn't her own voice.

“Meaning?”

“Not remembering anything. In other words, he told me to stay as the present me and think about the future.”

“Lord Linus said such a thing...?”

“But I can't do that. Because this is the past Celiastina's life. I don't have any memories

of the past, so I can't take it over. I mustn't do it. I should know that in my head....."

What was she saying. She couldn't say anything more to Asyut. She had to talk calmly. But, as much as she thought that, her feelings were running rampant.

"And yet, I was swayed by Linus' words. Linus said that, even if the past Celiastina returns, she will only be in pain. That she might suffer again from the saint's "ability" that has calmed now. And that, even if the power was gone, she won't be able to escape the guilt of having raised a hand to innocent people..... And I hate that there's a part of me who agrees that this might be the case."

Feeling like tears were about to overflow along with her words, she covered her mouth with both hands to try and resist that.

"You see, it's not that I want to take over Celiastina's life. And I don't want anyone to approve that..... is how it should be. And yet, I don't even know about that anymore. I don't understand my own feelings. I'm scared of my own selfish feelings getting larger and larger."

"Lady Celiastina, please calm down."

Asyut stood up and sat down beside Yuna. But when he slowly rubbed her back, Yuna stiffened and could not move. If she moved even the slightest bit, she felt like the feelings she was somehow holding back would become even more violent.

"Lady Celiastina."

Asyut's call hurt her ears. Don't call me by that name. My name is... Yuna. Not Celiastina.

To say that she wasn't taking over Celiastina's life while screaming like that in her heart... just what kind of mouth was saying that from? Wasn't she just paying lip service because she wanted to be a good person?

She didn't know, she didn't know.

Burying her face into her hands, which had been covering her mouth, she felt her mind become even more disordered.

She didn't know anything anymore.

She wanted to melt into these hands and have everything disappear. And then everything could be rebuilt from scratch. If only everything that Celiastina did, and everything that she did as Yuna, would just disappear.

“You’ve really... just been suffering.”

Asyut’s hand, which was covering her back, pulled her in strongly. And then two arms were wrapped around her. Yuna, who was suddenly warm, finally realized that she was being held after a short pause.

(-!!)

Reflexively, she twisted her body to leave but he was unyielding. Instead, she was held even more tightly to the point where she could hear Asyut’s breathing by her ear.

Yuna, who had been controlled by a confusion that was as thick as mud, felt like her head burst. Next, a completely different type of confusion started swirling inside of her.

“U-Um... Asyut...”

Her voice rose uncontrollably. Even though her bewilderment should have been more than conveyed through that call, Asyut placed even more strength in the arms that embraced Yuna.

“Lady Celiastina, are you saying that when you “remember” the past, the present you will disappear?”

Yuna’s breath caught.

“You’ll disappear from this world. You won’t become one with the past Celiastina’s memories. Exactly like the word means, you’ll disappear. Is that what you’re saying?”

Asyut’s breath and voice fell into Yuna’s ears.

“You’re a Lady Celiastina who has lost her memories. Why are you so afraid of the past Celiastina, and why are you averting your eyes from the future? To me, the future I will spend “with you” is not very visible.”

The force in Asyut’s arms loosened slightly. Yuna supported herself with both hands

and slowly raised her upper body, which had been buried against Asyut's chest. Raising her lowered eyes, they collided with Asyut's serious gaze.

Yuna bit her lip.

Could it be that Asyut was starting to realize it?

That the person here wasn't Celiastina but a completely different being.

Was she happy? Or was she sad? In any case, she couldn't declare her real name and that she was a separate person from Celiastina and have that be accepted. If she did that, then it felt like she wouldn't be able to backtrack at all. She would be hoping that Asyut would accept her as Yuna.

Shaking her head loosely, Yuna fled from Asyut's hands. She tried to pull her body away and place distance between her and Asyut, but his left hand, which was around her waist, pulled her in strongly.

"I feel the same as Lord Linus. If you say that you will disappear, then I want you to continue staying like this without any memories. It's because I've seen your earnestness, that the hate in me has calmed. But, if you were to disappear—"

"Please... stop."

Yuna interrupted him and couldn't help but bury her face into Asyut's shoulder. At that action, she was embraced strongly again, and she hated herself for finding it comfortable.

Asyut was always a level and calm man. Perhaps to the point of being too calm with respect to Celiastina. In order not to be crushed by his hate for Celiastina, he endeavored to control himself. That's why she had the impression that he was always looking at things one step away.

And that's why, this time too, she thought Asyut would chide her. She was sure she had wanted him to reply with something like, it not being okay to stay without her memories, or that choosing to run away wasn't like her.

But what was she thinking now that, in reality, Asyut's words and attitude was so far from that?

Confusion, terror, and – was this not pleasure?

She hated herself tremendously.

(I'm not prepared at all to return this body to Celiastina.)

Yuna was hopelessly made aware of this against Asyut's warm chest.

(.....I need to get away.)

Thinking this with a numb look, Yuna twisted her body a little. Finally, Asyut's hands came apart. Regaining a distance that was not close enough, yet not far enough, Yuna secretly released a breath.

“I’m sorry. I... haven’t gathered all my thoughts.”

Asyut gave a small shake of his head.

“.....Lady Celiastina.”

“Mm?”

“I’m sure you were looking for words from me that would sever your hesitation. Perhaps I should have answered that you should recover your past memories. However, I won’t say such a thing. I’m certain that, more than anyone else, I’m the one who sees the past you and the present you as separate.”

Asyut’s tired voice was slightly husky.

“I do not seem to hate the present you. However, that does not mean that the events of the past have been completely settled. I can’t hide the fact that even now I hate the past Lady Celiastina. But, when I am together with you, that wound doesn’t hurt as much. That is all.”

Therefore, Asyut hesitated before continuing.

“If you were to disappear, I wouldn’t know what to do. I wonder if I can accept the moment when you regain your past memories, Lady Celiastina. It is weak of me but I am still bound by the past.”

Yuna kept silent and stared at Asyut. That graceful face which was not turned to her right now, was facing the window directly. The light that shone in made Asyut's face stand out. Was it the future or the past that spread beyond the window?

“I’m sorry.”

Sighing, Yuna murmured that.

“I’m sorry, but I... I can’t move forward and forget about the past me. I can’t act like nothing happened.”

She couldn’t dream about shutting a lid on Celiastina’s feelings and taking her place to walk on the path that had been prepared for her.

“You don’t want to abandon the past Lady Celiastina, is what you’re saying, right?”

Abandon.

That word from Asyut stabbed into Yuna’s chest plainly. When Yuna asked Linus this, he didn’t say anything. Linus, you aren’t going to abandon Celiastina, right? Only a shadowed smile was given to that question.

The answer that Yuna wished for wasn’t given.

“I don’t... want to abandon her.”

“Even if no one is waiting eagerly for her return?”

That may be the truth. From the very beginning, what people needed might have just been the Holy Mark on her neck. People might have thought that there was no big difference as to what kind of person she was, so long as the Holy Mark was there. She was sure that Celiastina had also thought that.

“I don’t want to abandon her.”

Right now, she wasn’t able to have a firm resolve to leave this body and separate from everything around her. Moreover, she still didn’t know the good or bad actions that she had taken up to now. However, in these past few days of chasing Celiastina’s shadow, and finally being able to understand her shape, Yuna didn’t want to look away from that.

She wanted to know more about Celiastina. Not just chasing her shadow, but feeling her breath. She wanted to experience that Celiastina had existed here, crying at times, laughing at times, and that she had lived through each day.

Only that thought was certain.

Asyut stared at Yuna with pursed lips. He looked like he had a mountain of things he wanted to say, and Yuna knew what most of them would be about. But still, no, because of that, Yuna could not say anything more than that.

“.....For me, there is still a small point of interest about the past Lady Celiastina.”

“Point of interest?”

“Yes.”

His wandering gaze spoke of his hesitation as to whether he should talk about it or not.

“While I was investigating about Lady Celiastina, I read many books about the abilities of the saints. There weren’t many on her ability, which made me curious. In the end, I didn’t know what ability she held at that time, but in the course of the investigation I learned about many details of the past saints’ abilities.”

The ability of a saint. Yuna’s chest hurt with just that word. Because that power caused the past Celiastina to walk a path of destruction.

“I believe I was able to follow most of the past saints through the books. All of them, to some degree or other, had an ability. Some had the ability to create shooting stars, but there were also saints whose powers wouldn’t be noticeable in an everyday life. However, among those, there was no one who had a power that was so “negative” like Lady Celiastina’s.”

Surprised, Yuna’s body stiffened. She took a long hard look at Asyut’s face.

“The saints’ abilities are said to be a blessing from our God, Vida. In other words, apart from being useful or not, at the very least there hasn’t been an abominable power that was bestowed. I believe that aspect is why everyone worships the saint. Because these girls have miraculous powers that ordinary people cannot attain. Then, why is Lady Celiastina the only one to be granted such a dreadful power?”

Now that he mentioned it, that was true. Even among the ones that Yuna investigated, none of the saints had abilities that would be shunned by people. And yet why was Celiastina the only one.

Linus said that she probably had it from the start. That this was how a saint's ability worked. But, was that the truth?

"I just remembered. Lady Celiastina is an orphan. I heard that she was raised in an orphanage until she came to the royal palace at the age of fourteen. I'm not saying that it was because of the orphanage, but perhaps something happened during her life at the orphanage....."

Something. During her life at the orphanage.

Yuna kept her eyes on Asyut and blinked multiple times, overcome with surprise.

There was still more.

Everything hadn't been made clear yet, and there might be more suffering.

And if there was a reason as to why Celiastina was granted such an abominable power?

It might be that the real beginning was lurking there- Yuna bit her lip hard.

Chapter Eight

She couldn't turn her eyes away now that she came this far.

She would visit the orphanage where Celiastina lived. It didn't matter how trivial it was, so long as she could learn about anything related to her there, the thread wrapped around her heart would surely come undone.

Asyut also did not stop Yuna. He himself might have wanted to uncover what lay at the bottom of Celiastina.

It was decided that Asyut would investigate as to the whereabouts of the orphanage.

That said, the investigation was not that complicated. Because it was the orphanage where the Saint Celiastina grew up. The royal palace had to know where it was.

There was just one worry; whether that orphanage still existed now. According to the rumors on the street, Celiastina was identified as a saint when the director approached her with intentions to assault her. It might have been a story created to make her personal history tragic, but if it was the truth then it was likely the orphanage's doors wouldn't be open in the present. The director was punished, and there was a possibility that the people who were involved became scattered.

"That's a serious look on your face. Is something the matter?"

A voice suddenly called out and Yuna was returned to herself.

Nasha, who was preparing tea, tilted her head and peered at Yuna.

"Ah, no. It's nothing."

Hurriedly putting on a smile, it might have looked a bit strained.

The next day, after talking with Asyut, Yuna waited quietly in her room for him to contact her. There wasn't much she could do, and shame sank into her body. Except for repeatedly passing the time with her usual ceremonies, Yuna couldn't do anything. And even those ceremonies were going to decrease; out of concern for the movements

of the anti-saint faction.

“It’d be nice if you could freely go out again soon.”

Yuna hadn’t talked to Nasha about the problems she was carrying at all. She didn’t want to involve Nasha in this maze with no exit, and she wanted Nasha to stay smiling, unrelated to these problems. And being able to occasionally have tea together like this was Yuna’s salvation.

“I believe things will slowly move in a better direction.”

Nasha murmured this encouragingly as she looked worriedly at Yuna, who was silent. Move slowly in a better direction. It’d be nice if that were the case. If light was able to fall down gradually on the people in the royal palace who were suffering from pain.

“I found a lovely shop in town the other day. They have a lot of delicious desserts. I’m sure you will also like them, Lady Celiastina. Once things calm down, please attend it. The shop’s interior is also clean and cute.”

Yuna smiled and gave a large nod at Nasha, who was being concerned about her.

“Then, at that time, I’ll have to ask you to take me there, Nasha.”

“.....Yes! I would be happy to! I am looking forward to it.”

When she exchanged smiles with Nasha, a reserved knock was heard before another maid entered the room. A letter was held in her hand.

“Lady Celiastina. This is from Lord Asyut.”

As she received the white envelope which was presented to her, Yuna straightened her posture slightly. She didn’t have to guess at what was written in the letter. It was about the orphanage that raised Celiastina. He already investigated it.

Nasha must have noticed how Yuna’s expression stiffened for an instant, because she did not ask about the letter’s contents.

“If you have need of anything else, please call on me at any time.”

Nasha gave a bow, as if aware of Yuna’s feelings, and then left the room. Yuna broke

the seal on the letter slowly while feeling appreciation for Nasha's consideration in giving her privacy.

The written contents were concise.

He knew the location of the orphanage that raised Celiastina. It still functioned as an orphanage in the present. If she wished to visit, then Asyut would come along as well. And, if that was the case, then arrangements needed to be made starting tomorrow.

The location of the orphanage was a short trip east on horseback from the royal palace.

The name of the orphanage was... Centurial Eastern Orphanage.

(-Eh?)

Yuna had been reading casually but the moment she saw the orphanage's name she was caught by a strange sensation.

Centurial Eastern Orphanage. Centurial... Eastern.....

(I've heard that name before.)

Yuna's hands clenched on the paper, wrinkling its edges.

Maybe she had simply heard the name in passing, since the orphanage wasn't that far from the royal capital. No, that wasn't right. It wasn't just that.

(It's not that far from the royal capital. It's not far from my past house too.)

Her temperature shot up as her emotions seemed to swell.

The memories of the past that she had completely forgotten up to now were slowly coming back.

A young Yuna. Her mother was pulling her by the hand to a far away place. It wasn't that far from their house, but Yuna thought the distance was like a little trip. They arrived at an old and large building in a swaying carriage. Ivy crept through the entire area. There was a large nameplate hung on the gates. She asked her mother what was written.

“Centuriel Eastern Orphanage.”

—That was...

Yuna dropped the letter in shock. The rustling, as it landed on the ground, was sucked into the carpet.

(I've been there before. To that orphanage.)

She suddenly remembered it clearly.

Ah yes, sometimes her mother would head out to the orphanage to help them, since they didn't have enough people. Yuna, who had been a child, was curious about what seemed to be her mother's secret place, and wasn't happy that her mother had one. And so she asked her mother to take her with her. The first time she visited the orphanage, she was scared by how old it was, but there were many other kids and she immediately made friends. It was really, really fun. And so, every now and then, she would go with her mother and show up at the orphanage. However, all Yuna did was play with the other children and didn't help out at all.

But that did not last long. Her family's herbal medicine shop became busy, and her mother couldn't visit the orphanage as much. The distance was too far for Yuna to go alone too. And so, naturally, Yuna stopped going to play at the orphanage. At first, she complained and made things hard for her mother but, since she was a child, she soon forgot about the orphanage and became engrossed in something else.....

(I'm certain this is the orphanage from that time.)

So, Celiastina had been here.

Yuna closed her eyes and tried digging through her memories again. Had Celiastina been there amongst the children she had played with at the time? A girl with golden hair and purple eyes. She would have surely been extraordinarily cute at the time and so it wouldn't be strange for memories of her to remain.

Faces of children, whose names she had already forgotten, appeared and disappeared in her mind. There had been an introverted girl with cute curly hair, and a girl with slightly slanted eyes. There had been a cheery and kind boy, who was like everyone's older brother. Come to think of it, there had also been a black-haired older girl who was the boy's secret unrequited love. The boys had made the area near the front gate

their base, so the girls generally played around the backyard. When they played house, there had been a girl with braids who was always the mom. The role of eldest daughter and second daughter were generally decided too. Yuna was often given the role of the dad who didn't come home often because of work. Like that, they would run around excitedly- but she suddenly turned around.

Yuna could see a human shape at the edge of the backyard. Someone was standing there alone. She couldn't see the person well, because they were hiding behind plants, but she could see their shape. It was someone's back with flowing golden hair. Who was that? She hadn't talked to that person much, so she decided to try talking to them.

And so she went closer. She was envious of the pretty golden hair, which was different from her brown hair. Hey, what are you doing? Let me join. When Yuna said that, the young girl's shoulders twitched before she turned around. Her large eyes, which were wide open, were an entrancing purple.....

Yuna stood still in her room, shocked.

Why did she forget? Why didn't she remember?

Why... why had it taken her this long.

The two of them immediately opened up to each other. The blonde girl didn't have many friends to play together with, but she didn't dislike Yuna being beside her. The two explored the orphanage and made secret passwords. Yuna learned that the reason the girl was always alone in the backyard was because she took care of the plants. Because of Yuna's family's job, she knew a lot about plants and so she taught that girl how to raise them. The two also exchanged presents. Yes, Yuna honestly didn't mind giving that girl her favorite ribbon, which her mother had given her. Thank you, I'll treasure it, is what the girl said, smiling. Looking at her made Yuna happy too.

(I.....)

Even though there were all these memories.

Something welled up suddenly within her chest before becoming overflowing tears. The tears fell, one after another, without stopping. These were Yuna's own emotions. And, at the same time, Celiastina's emotions. Right now, the two had the same feelings. These tears were for the both of them. Unable to bear this impact which seemed to shake her soul, Yuna collapsed on the spot. And then, like that, she continued to cry

for some time. She cried, and cried, and cried, and still it wasn't enough.

Now that Yuna thought about it, when she had first been thrown into that white world, there was a woman standing there alone. Her long hair hid her expression and so Yuna couldn't confirm who it was, but now she knew that it was Celiastina.

I despise you.

The one who said that was the Celiastina in that moment.

What did she mean by that? Were those words about how cold-hearted Yuna was for easily forgetting their childhood memories? Or was it.....

She visited Linus' room again in the evening.

In contrast to last time, when he had been elegantly reading a book, today there were various documents scattered across his desk. Yuna showed up as he was in the middle of picking up a document with one hand, a difficult expression on his face.

“Sorry. Am I interrupting?”

“No, I don’t mind. I apologize for the mess. Sit?”

“No, thank you. I’ll be going back soon.”

“How cold.”

Linus gave a low chuckle.

“Linus, I’m going to try and go to the orphanage that raised Celiastina.”

When she muttered that bit by bit, Linus looked up in silence. His eyes shone with faint surprise.

“.....To be honest, I’m still lost. I haven’t sorted out my feelings. But my feelings for wanting to understand Celiastina haven’t changed. There’s no certainty that I’ll find anything if I go to the orphanage, but I still need to go.”

Linus just stared at Yuna with a serious expression.

“.....I see.”

But, in the end, he gave a single nod.

“I know it’s rash to go out in such an unstable time. But, I can’t put it off anymore. I feel like if I stand still now then something I should have caught will disappear. Besides, I don’t have any time.”

“And with your little time remaining, you’re going to spend it for Celaistina, hm.”

For a moment, Yuna pressed her lips together tightly.

“.....For Celiastina... and for myself.”

Right now, she was two people as a single person. It was another person here in Celiastina’s body. But, Yuna was sure that wasn’t herself either. Yuna thought that in this place was someone who was neither Celiastina or Yuna.

“Have you told Asyut? That you’re another person.”

Yuna shook her head.

“Has he asked who you are? He should be noticing it by now. That you’re not the same person as Celiastina.”

“Even if he did, I wouldn’t answer.”

It’s because it was Asyut, that she didn’t want to say needless things.

“Linus. Today, I thought that I would tell you I was going to the orphanage. It’s thanks to you that I know quite a lot about Celiastina, but there’s just a little more. That’s why, Linus, please wait for Celiastina.”

Before her feelings could become more disordered, Yuna declared all the things she wanted to say in one go. Linus seemed to sigh in irritation but he pursed his lips and said nothing more.

Yuna turned on her heel to leave the room. But then she remembered something and turned back.

"Hey, Linus, do you know? Celiastina's true name before she came to the royal palace."

".....Aa."

Linus blinked, caught off guard, but then he slowly nodded.

"Her real name is Cella."

Cella. Yes, the girl that she knew was also called Cella.

"Thank you, Linus."

Yuna murmured before quietly leaving the room.

The next day, in the afternoon, the person who came to pick up Yuna after she finished her ceremony wasn't Aeneas but Siegcrest. The large and showy man raised a hand casually in greeting and walked towards Yuna with a relaxed expression.

"Yo, Celia. Great job."

"Sieg? Did something happen? Why are you here for me?"

"Nah, I just felt like it. It's nice to do this every so often, right?"

Be that as it may, it wasn't like the vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights to go out of his way on a random day to pick her up just because he "felt like it". She couldn't say this definitively with Siegcrest's whimsical nature, but it was still unnatural. Yuna put some distance between them, thinking that he was planning something, and making Siegcrest cross his arms with a semi-offended look.

"What's with that. How rude. I even went out of my way to come here for you."

"Yes, but why?"

"I told ya that I just felt like it."

As he said this he uncrossed his arms and rushed towards her. In the moment when Yuna breathed in, she was lifted easily by those thick arms.

"W-What're you doing!?"

“You’re free after this, right? Then let’s go see the knights at the training ground. Those guys are being noisy, asking me to bring you there once more.”

“Eh?! What are you going to do if Asyut sees that again! He’ll get angry!”

“It’ll be fine. He doesn’t come that often.”

“It’s not fine!! Please put me down!”

“Come on, let’s go! Don’t worry, I’ve told Aeneas that I’ll be taking you there.”

How could he tell her not to worry! But she already knew he wasn’t a man who would listen to others’ opinions, and so Yuna could only hang her head in resignation.

Yuna, who was being held in such a way that she was sitting on Siegcrest’s left arm, felt like wanting to disappear when all the people who they passed stopped to look at them with startled eyes. By nature, someone as big as Siegcrest carrying someone in his arms and walking down the hall was bound to draw attention. But because the one being carried was THAT Celiastina, there was no way people wouldn’t be surprised.

However, the surprised look on everyone’s face only lasted a second before it changed to a wry smile, as if they were thinking “Oh, again”. At some point in time, the fact that crazy things happened whenever Siegcrest and Yuna were together had become common knowledge. When they entered the training ground like that, even the knights didn’t seem too surprised.

“You guys! Like I promised, I brought Celia.”

Yuna turned even redder when he raised her high in the air, as if she were a spoil of war.

“Sieg, please put me down already!!”

Of course Yuna’s request didn’t reach Siegcrest’s ears. The knights, who were also looking up at Yuna, seemed to be enjoying this situation. They lowered their swords and whatever they were holding to gather around Siegcrest.

“Celia has said that she’d like to participate in today’s training and to be fully taught all of the techniques.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Oh, my bad. She wants to participate in today’s training and teach you guys techniques.”

“I didn’t say that!!”

The knights raised their voices in criticism, en masse. Even if their superior was reckless, it seemed like his men were decent. On a side note, she hadn’t yet met the “leader” of the Order of Holy Knights, but if he was as absurd as Siegcrest then she was worried for the future of this country.

Finally Siegcrest placed her down and Yuna sighed in relief. It was slightly rough but the feeling of the firm, hard ground was a comfort.

“By the way, Asyut didn’t come here, right?”

While glancing around, Siegcrest asked his men quietly.

“He wasn’t here.”

Great, Siegcrest nodded seriously.

“Then, today, I’m going to watch over your guys’ training with Celia. If you do it mushily then Celia’s gonna go home. So show her your best.”

When he gave one loud clap, the knights took that as the signal to return to their original positions. There were some who looked reluctant to part from Yuna, but they also seemed fired up. Soon, spirited voices and the sound of clashing blades resounded through the training ground. The speed at which they switched over, showed that they really were professionals.

“Sieg...”

Following Siegcrest, who sat down on a couch that was placed against the wall, Yuna lowered herself quietly beside him.

“You don’t really give them solid training, huh.”

“Didn’t I just tell them what to do?”

He tugged lightly on her hair.

“Ow.”

“Uwah, your hair is so silky, Celia. It feels nice.”

“Please stop, geez. I’m not going to sit beside you, Sieg.”

“Hey, wait a sec.”

Grabbing Yuna’s left hand, when she rose to run away, Siegcrest pulled her back with a sharp tug. Thanks to that, she ended up sitting down beside Siegcrest again.

“What!”

“.....I heard you’re going out to a town.”

Yuna started and then stiffened at this unexpected topic.

“To be honest, I don’t really know the details of what you did in the past at the royal palace. It’s most likely the people at the top and Asyut hid me intentionally. It was the same as having been told not to meet you for a long time. That’s why I might be able to say this, but I think you should do more of the things that you want to do. From what I’ve personally seen, you’re a good person who follows her own beliefs. It’s not like everything you do is the right thing, but there are certainly people who were saved by your actions.”

“.....”

“But.”

Siegcrest looked straight ahead with a serious expression. In his line of sight were his men swinging their swords earnestly, but right now something else might have been reflected in his eyes.

“It’s bad right now. Timing-wise.”

“Timing-wise?”

“You must have heard too, right? Lately, disturbing movements have been spreading

in the royal capital. The anti-saint faction people have made an organization and are starting to move.”

Yuna, who was looking at Siegcrest’s profile, lowered her eyes unconsciously. For Siegcrest to be concerned meant that the anti-saint faction had become a sizable problem. People who were not happy about Celiastina were about to take action. Even though she should have been prepared for this, her heart was still inevitably hurt by this fact.

“This group existed before. But it was a group that was too small to deal with, so they were left alone. And now, they suddenly became a huge organization. To a point where they can’t be ignored any longer. -There may be a civil war soon.”

“C-Civil war...”

Yuna’s breath caught when she learned that it was more serious than she thought. Her nervousness spiked at hearing such a dangerous word like civil war slip out of Siegcrest’s mouth. In the last few decades, there hadn’t been any large conflict that could be called a civil war. For Yuna, it was a word that had nothing to do with her. And yet, to think that it was no one else but Celiastina- this body that was the origin causing such a huge situation.

“You understand, right? Just how dangerous it is for you to be going out in such a time.”

“.....I understand.”

Yuna couldn’t raise her lowered head. The malice that the past Celiastina had released had gradually eaten into the people, and now they had become a force that knew no bounds. No one could stop it. Even if she tried to gather it all up desperately, it would rapidly spill from her hands and spread- and then, one day, it would become a large black lump.

And then, suddenly, there was a gentle impact on Yuna’s head. Siegcrest’s large palm was wrapped around Yuna’s head. When she looked up reflexively, her hair was mussed up.

“Don’t be depressed. You’re no longer surrounded by just enemies. So what if everyone isn’t your friend. Even I’m hated by some people, but I came all this way believing in the people who follow me and believe in me. Right now, Celia, you also have a lot of people you can believe in, you know? For example, this handsome man in front of you.”

Yuna smiled wryly and nodded.

“Ah, what was that! You look like you have an objection. It can’t be that you’re thinking I’m not a handsome man, right?”

“I don’t think that. I understand.”

“Really? Anyway, Celia, there’s certainly people who are carrying blades and hate you. But, what I don’t want you to forget, is that, on the other side, there are also people who are carrying blades to protect you. Just who do you think is protecting you from the anti-saint faction? –Us, of the Order of Holy Knights, said to be the greatest in the kingdom of Sibelius! RIGHT, EVERYONE?”

Siegcrest shouted that out in a loud voice. When he did so, the knights in the area, who seemed to have heard some part of their conversation, raised their swords firmly into the sky and roared back a response.

“–OORAH!!”

Those strong voices, lacking any hesitation, echoed directly in Yuna’s heart.

“Yep, so it’s like that.”

Siegcrest looked over the knights with satisfaction.

“Understand?”

“Y-Yes.....”

“Do you reaaally understand?”

“Ye... Yes!”

“Do you really really understand?”

“YES!”

Yuna’s reply resounded clearly through the room at a level that wouldn’t lose to the knights. Siegcrest nodded with a bold smile.

“Good then. –Go to the town.”

“Huh?”

At those sudden words, her slack face was pinched.

“Because, you want to go to the town right? Right now, it’s dangerous around you but we’re with you. And you understand that. Besides, Asyut will be together with you. That guy will definitely protect you, Celia. It’s true the risk is huge, but sometimes you have to move when there’s no choice but to move.”

Her pinched cheek tingled with pain. But that pain stimulated her train of thoughts. What Siegcrest was saying. Why Siegcrest brought Yuna here. Like a misty landscape clearing, Yuna understood it little by little.

“Thank you..... thank you, Sieg. And everyone!!”

This time Yuna looked over at everyone with a full smile. It made her happy that there were many people who received that smile. And, now she was fully understanding just how fortunate and grateful she was.

She had to move. No matter what lay ahead, she would move because that was what she decided. The people who gave her that push and supported her, encouraged her more than anything else.

Chapter Nine

Aeneas walked down the corridor alone. Suddenly, he stopped and raised his head absently. –Beyond that door, Celiastina wasn't there right now.

Aeneas could only smile bitterly at how, every time he passed her room, he found himself searching for her, even through the door. Right now, he didn't have the energy to tell himself off for how weak he was being.

Celiastina looked quite busy these past few days. Because she wasn't allowed to act alone, Aeneas would always head to see her and escort her during those times. But even though the time he spent beside her was longer than usual, why did he not feel that at all. Instead he felt like they were drifting apart from each other more than usual. Both of them were awkward and could only have harmless and inoffensive conversations.

Celiastina liked Asyut. Even Aeneas knew that. The more he was by her side, the more he could not help but feel that. Celiastina treated everyone kindly, and was the same to him too. But the affection that was there was different from the affection directed at Asyut.

It was shown clearly that when Celiastina was truly in pain the one she sought was Asyut. In that corridor, Celiastina had justified her reason for seeking Asyut because her topic involved personal circumstances, which made Aeneas understand that it wasn't an important problem. Celiastina, who seemed to have been driven into a corner, dispensed with all reason and just wanted to meet Asyut.

And even Asyut thought about her with great care. Everything was told by the way Asyut's eyes shot at Aeneas when he had been holding Celiastina. The relationship between the two, which had been completely frozen, had changed greatly in areas that he didn't know. –Ahh, why was she with Asyut? From the beginning, was there no room for him to enter? He wanted to think that it would be fine as long as Celiastina was happy. It should be like that. Yet, it hurt so much that it felt like his body was being torn apart. He couldn't be honest about blessing them.

(Lady Celiastina went out somewhere with Asyut today, huh.)

He had not heard where they went. Apparently, it was all quite secretive, and they slipped out incognito. Could it have something to do with how busy they had been? It hurt that he wasn't informed, and it was also vexing that he wasn't allowed to accompany them.

When Celiastina returned, should he take her and disappear to somewhere far away?

Aeneas shook his head when such a ridiculous idea came to mind.

Why was he so attracted to Celiastina in the first place?

The first time he was drawn to her was that dark night when they stepped into the dungeon, the Holy Jail. When Celiastina confronted her own mistakes and received a horrible shock, Aeneas was also shocked. He couldn't explain his reasons but, in that moment, he believed that was the beginning.

Originally, she was a being that was supposed to be hated. Most of all, his best friend, Neisan, had been hurt severely. It shouldn't be the case that he was attracted to her. When he thought that, he felt embarrassed, and like he did something inexcusable to Neisan. However, he was scared to confront his conflicting feelings and came to this point with his back turned to all that.

(I can't call myself Neisan's best friend anymore, huh.)

Even though Neisan had raised his voice to save Aeneas, regardless of the danger to himself. Aeneas was far from returning that debt of gratitude.

Even now he continued to betray Neisan. How much distrust did he have when Neisan was announced as Celiastina's bodyguard? He had various suspicions like wondering what Neisan was thinking- what he was planning. In the end, he was terribly relieved when Neisan was not actually entrusted to be an escort.

(I'm the worst. Honestly.)

When he thought back on that again, he became filled with self-hatred. For having an illicit love for someone he could never reach, and for looking at his best friend with distrust. What kind of thoughts did Neisan have when he looked at him. Neisan never said anything. He treated Aeneas the same as usual. However, it was impossible for nothing to have changed in his heart.

(But, right now, I don't know what that guy is thinking.)

Aeneas clenched his teeth strongly.

He didn't want to become estranged from Neisan like this. No, even if he couldn't stop them from growing distant, he didn't want to just wait and let their hearts separate without saying anything. Neisan might not forgive him anymore- But even still. He was going to meet Neisan directly and be told that.

Aeneas quickened his walk, as if stirred up by an impulse.

He had to meet and talk with Neisan.

He couldn't change his feelings for Celiastina, but he wanted to say that properly. He strongly thought that.

He ran down the stairs, leaping past every other step. While almost colliding with people around corners, Aeneas walked directly to the training ground. Neisan, who was nearly never an escort, usually participated in training.

When he arrived immediately at the training ground, there were squires and soldiers swinging swords in pairs. He searched for the rare redhead amongst them, but he couldn't see anything like that anywhere.

(Did I guess wrong?)

Feeling something catch in his chest, he stubbornly cast his gaze around, wondering if Neisan was taking a break at the edge of the training ground. One of the squires noticed Aeneas and called out to him but, when asked, it seemed like he hadn't seen Neisan even once since this morning.

“Did he take a holiday today?”

“He didn't have any plans like that yesterday, but maybe he fell ill.”

“I see, thanks.”

He'd never heard of Neisan falling ill and staying in bed. But, when he thought about the Holy Jail, he changed his mind about it being unlikely and decided to visit Neisan's room.

As he returned the way he came, an unpleasant feeling that swirled in his chest began to grow larger and larger. Was Neisan really in his room? And if he wasn't, then where was he?

He stepped out of the building and then entered the residential annex. Because it was the daytime on a weekday, other than the few servants that he passed, the building was largely uninhabited. When he arrived at Neisan's room, a monotonous and unfriendly tall door stood in his way. Aeneas held his breath unconsciously and then knocked several times on the door.

.....However, a familiar voice was not returned.

“Neisan?”

He knocked again, this time a little stronger. But still he couldn't hear any sound from inside.

“Hey, Neisan, if you can hear me then say something.”

Finally, he called out again. The expected silence wrapped around his body and Aeneas placed his hand on the door knob. When he pressed, the knob turned down with an unexpected lack of resistance. It was unlocked.

Aeneas opened the door gingerly. Creaaaak, only the dry sound of the door ushered in the sudden visitor.

The room was completely empty.

Neisan wasn't here either. Thinking about the possibilities of this fact, Aeneas stood there dumbfounded for a while.

Chapter Ten

Yuna watched the changing scenery as she sat on top of a horse, supported by Asyut.

She never expected that she would leave out of the gates in the same way that Yodel, who she saw off several days ago, did. Feeling a strange connection, Yuna sighed in wonder. That sigh, in the blink of an eye, disappeared behind them.

Yuna and Asyut were on a horse that was galloping on a continuous straight road; the two were heading to the orphanage that Celiastina used to live at in the past.

Yuna and Asyut both knew how dangerous it was to leave the city when worries about the movements of the anti-saint faction were rising, but this was something they couldn't yield on. Though it was unreasonable, they officially left the royal palace secretly.

Asyut had arrived at their meeting place slightly late. But when she asked if something had happened, he only smiled and shook his head, replying that it was nothing important. That being said, for Asyut – who was always busy – it must have been quite hard for him to leave his work and slip out of the royal palace. When she thought about that, she could only hold him in high esteem.

But still, it honestly made her happy for the two of them to go out. It had also been a while since she rode a horse like this. Yes, ever since that night when she first woke up as Celiastina, at a loss at the bottom of a cliff, and was saved by Asyut–.

(A lot of time has passed since then, huh.)

That night was the start of everything.

She had wondered why Asyut had been angry when he saved her. When she tried talking to him, he replied with cold words and made her shrink. Still, on that night, he firmly supported Yuna who was swaying on the horse.

(My “time” should have already ended in that moment, but time has definitely been passing since then.)

Now, she was sure that if she spoke to Asyut behind her, no matter how trivial it was, he would respond with a gentle voice. Time, which had certainly been passing, brought about a great change to Yuna and Asyut's relationship. It made her happy, sad, and pained. It gave her feelings that she couldn't put into words.

When she swayed on the horse, the scenery changed dizzingly.

The scenery that was seen in the distance, approached quickly, and then once again became distant. Things that she thought were far away, flew by all too soon.

Yuna didn't speak to Asyut. It was hard to raise her voice against the cutting wind and, above all, she felt like the right thing to do was not to say anything. Asyut also didn't speak to Yuna. And Yuna was thankful for that.

The horse continued running as it was.

They passed through people on the streets and country roads. There was nothing around them to the point where she wondered if the orphanage they were heading to even existed. Before she knew it, Yuna started to fall into a doze. Her lower back hurt because of being unused to riding a horse, but she felt comfortable enough that the pain became indistinct. Finally, losing to sleep, Yuna leaned against Asyut and felt a greater sense of security wrap around her.

“Lady Celiastina, I can see it.”

After a while, Asyut spoke up. Yuna, who had been completely leaning against Asyut, woke up from the vibrations of his voice. She twisted her body to adjust her position and then, when she looked at the spread out scenery in front of her again, a gasp slipped out.

Before they went down a gentle slope, a large building with gates could be seen. Beyond that, on the other side, was a scattered village and then, even further, a thick forest seemed to stretch out.

—Ah, what a nostalgic sight.

Her younger self must have seen the same sight in the past. The only things left in her impression were the gloomy ivy crawling on the walls and the small storeroom where

she and her friends slipped into. These strong feelings were revived for the first time the moment she looked over the entire building.

“It looks like that big building, huh.”

“Yes, most likely.”

It was the same old building. Like her memories, there was ivy tangled all over the wall and the iron gate was also rusty.

The horse’s speed gradually slowed as Yuna and Asyut approached the building. What if it had already become abandoned? This thought passed her mind, but it immediately turned out to be a needless fear.

On the other side of the gate, children could be heard.

That also gave her complicated feelings. Laughter was mixed into their voices.

“It looks like... people are here.”

Yuna secretly took in a deep breath to calm her heart, which was beating fast enough to be painful. She got down from the horse with the help of Asyut and felt the solidity of the ground beneath her feet that she hadn’t felt in a while. She still felt like she was floating and swaying but, by the time she reached the gates, her body’s sensations returned.

“Let’s go in.”

Asyut placed his hand on the iron gate; the gate raised a rusty screech, as if hating being opened. And, as if surprised by that noise, the excited voices of the children which they had just heard went silent all at once.

When they entered the orphanage’s courtyard, there were about five children beside the gate who were frozen. The youngest was a girl around three or four years old, and the oldest was a boy around eleven or twelve years old. Everyone looked at the intruders who came into the orphanage with curiosity. The older children had gazes that were permeated with clear wariness.

“Um, hello.”

Yuna spoke in an unassuming manner. When she did, the children corrected their posture as if struck. So that she wouldn't frighten them any more, Yuna made an effort to crouch gently beside the children. She smiled sweetly when their line of sight was at the same height.

“I’m sorry for how sudden this is, but could I interrupt for a moment?”

The children looked at each other at a loss.

“Who are you people?”

A boy, who looked to be the oldest among them, opened his mouth. He observed Yuna with caution but, somewhere, he seemed shy and his gaze wavered.

“In the past, I used to be taken care of here. The person behind me is the one who brought me here.”

“–You were here... in the past?”

“Yep. It’s been such a long time, I thought I’d drop in for a visit.”

“But you’re not one of this generation’s people, right? Because I don’t know you. Are you from the generation before?”

While petting his small brothers and sisters, who clung to him, the boy threw out even more questions. Yuna didn’t know the meaning of “this generation” and “generation before”, so she unconsciously looked back at Asyut behind her. Asyut, who caught her look, shook his head to show that he didn’t understand either.

“This orphanage closed once, and so the people before that are called the “generation before”.”

The boy guessed Yuna’s question and gave a simple explanation.

“This is the first time someone from the generation before came back here.”

Yuna couldn’t find her words and simply looked back at the boy. Even after receiving an explanation, she couldn’t understand the situation. So, after Celiastina left this orphanage, something really did happen.

“Um, I was wondering if we could meet the director.”

The boy nodded and then called for all the children beside him to stand up.

“Everyone, we’re going to the director. Let’s race to see who gets there first.”

With those few words, the children who had been nervous and stiff returned to being excited. The boy watched everyone run off with fun and then turned back to Yuna and Asyut.

“Please wait a bit.”

Yuna nodded and then slowly stood up. Looking at the backs of the children who were sucked into the building, a smile rose but, at the same time, nervousness. Did something happen in the past at this orphanage? Or perhaps nothing happened?

There were a ton of things she wanted to ask and wanted to know. But, could those answers be found here-.

The wait wasn’t that long.

In a short amount of time the closed door of the building, which had kept silent, slowly opened again with a dull sound.

A face peered out from that crack; it was a gray-haired woman who looked somewhat worn.

The moment the woman timidly looked out at them and recognized Yuna, her eyes, which were behind glasses, opened wide and her breath caught. She was frozen as if time had stopped only around her but then, in the next instant, she sprang over to Yuna.

“Ah, ah..... Cella! It really is you!”

The woman called out to Yuna with tears mixed in her voice and clung to Yuna like she would collapse. While that was being done to Yuna, she could only look down at the woman without words. She looked like the years had taken quite a toll on her, but Yuna knew this person. During the period Yuna came here to play, this person was already

in the orphanage. The woman didn't notice Yuna's shock as she grabbed Yuna's pale arms and sobbed.

"You've become so beautiful. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Cella. I couldn't do anything."

Apologies spilled out as if a dam had burst. Yuna, as herself, had no way of knowing what those apologies were for. They came here specifically to seek those answers.

-As she thought, something happened here in the past.

"It's been a long time... though I don't know if I should say that."

The woman's eyebrows furrowed as she looked up at Yuna, who opened her mouth with reserve. She must have felt a strangeness at the way Yuna spoke as if she were a stranger. However, unfortunately, the present Yuna didn't know whether to be happy or sad at this "reunion".

"I apologize deeply for our sudden intrusion. I am the First Holy Knight, Asyut Rothenlukia. Due to some complicated circumstances, Lady Celiastina and I have come here. We would like to have some time to speak with you."

Asyut, who seemed to decide that the situation should be temporarily calmed, broke in.

"The First Holy Knight... Lord Asyut."

The woman repeated his name as she took a long and hard look at him. It looked like her mind could not keep up with all these unexpected events happening at the same time. Looking between Asyut and Yuna, she tried her hardest to find the source of the confusion that had suddenly fallen on her. When Yuna and Asyut waited patiently for her next words, the woman eventually began to regain her presence of mind.

"Please excuse the sorry state of this place and all the disordered rooms but, if you do not mind, please come inside."

Awkwardly, she returned that answer.

"Then, we accept your hospitality..... Incidentally, you are...?"

When Asyut asked this question, the woman looked up at Yuna with hope in her eyes.

It felt like she was relying on Yuna to really not treat her like a stranger. However, Yuna didn't have the answer. And so, she could only lower her eyes in silence.

"My name is Kazlow. I serve as the director of this orphanage."

Kazlow answered in a voice that held disappointment.

"Though... I don't have those qualifications."

Her sad smile immediately disappeared when she turned her back to them.

The orphanage was enormous, but its construction was not extravagant.

Though modest, the long corridor they continued down held the warmth of people, and Yuna looked here and there as she followed Kazlow. There were a number of innocent pictures drawn by the children decorating the walls and, between those, there were dried flowers casually placed. In several places, there were silly posters saying "Don't run in the halls" and "Make sure to greet people". Everything she saw made her feel nostalgic.

The drawing room they were shown into was built better compared to the halls outside. Still, of course it wasn't the same as the ones in the royal palace. Were the crooked textiles on the walls made by the director and children? To Yuna, this was a lovely atmosphere which brought back memories of the past days, but to Asyut who was sitting beside her it must have been a fresh experience.

"So this is the place where Lady Celiastina grew up."

"Mm."

The director, Kazlow, told them she would prepare tea and left her seat. Unable to be calm while they waited in silence, Yuna exchanged some words with Asyut.

"We rode the horse only for a little while, and yet this place is completely different from the royal capital, huh."

"That's true. It's not that the royal palace is unpleasant, but the atmosphere in the country allows you to relax. It feels like the flow of time itself is different."

“It’s very calm here, and time just passes.”

Yes, calmly and slowly, the gentle time passes.

From the window, the excited voices of the children could be heard again. They were healthy voices, with no traces of gloom.

“–Did something really happen here? In this warm place?”

Asyut glanced at Yuna.

“Considering how Miss Kazlow reacted when she saw us at the beginning, I believe something happened here. However, it’s true that it’s hard to imagine the orphanage, as it is now, of having a guilty past. But even if time passes gently, time is certainly passing.”

Ah, yes, Yuna was easily convinced. It was unmistakable that many things were different since the time Celiastina spent here in the past. Perhaps there weren’t even any traces of the past. But, if it completely changed that much, then it’d be meaningless to find an answer from the current scenery. But that was fine. It meant change had come to the orphanage, in a good direction.

“I apologize for the wait.”

Kazlow reappeared with a flustered voice.

“There aren’t many people here, so I apologize for all the running around.”

Kazlow apologized as she poured the tea. But her motions were familiar and there was a sense of security from watching them. Kazlow’s feelings might have calmed down during the time she had been preparing the tea.

“Miss Kazlow, I would like to keep the fact that we came here, and the conversation that we will have, secret.”

“Alright.”

Kazlow, who took a seat facing them, nodded solemnly.

“As you can tell, by the two of us coming here alone, we have a topic we don’t want

publicized."

"I understand."

Receiving Kazlow's clear response, Asyut gestured at Yuna to continue.

"Kazlow, to be honest... I don't have any memories... of the time I lived here."

In the end, after some hesitation, Yuna broached the subject. If she could, it would have been best to confess that she and Celiastina were completely different people, but of course that was the one thing she couldn't do. Kazlow was thrown into disorder and, above all, Asyut was listening next to them.

"It's not just the time I lived here. I don't have any memories except for very recent ones."

"Amne... sia...?"

Yuna nodded slowly. Kazlow's eyes widened with shock.

"How... in the world?"

"I had an accident at the royal palace and lost consciousness. When I woke up, I couldn't remember anything."

"Right now, you still can't remember anything?"

"Yes."

Kazlow shrunk away, as if afraid. It felt like she had caught a glimpse of an extreme confusion, but Kazlow kept her mouth closed.

"And so I want to know about the past. I believe the days I spent here at this orphanage were very significant to me. I came to visit today to see if I could hear about it."

"....."

A heavy silence filled the air.

"But."

When Kazlow opened her mouth next, her voice had become somewhat low.

“Aren’t the memories of your time at this orphanage too old to want to get back?”

“No, I’m sure they are precious.”

Yuna stubbornly clung on, but Kazlow did not seem enthused.

“Kazlow, what kind of life did I have here? Won’t you talk about it? Even a little bit at a time is fine.”

“.....”

There was a great disparity between Kazlow’s sunken expression and the bright voices of the children that could be heard from outside. The silence conveyed clearly that, if possible, she didn’t want to talk about it.

But Yuna couldn’t withdraw.

“Kazlow, please.”

“.....It must be very difficult to have lost your memories. But I believe there are pasts which are better left unremembered. Your life here is one of those.”

“You’re saying my days here weren’t bright then.”

“Yes, that’s right. That’s why I want you to have only the enjoyable and glamorous memories of when you started living in the royal palace.”

“I cannot do that.”

Yuna decisively denied that.

“None of the days I spent at the royal palace were glamorous or fun. I was hurt in the royal palace and, above all, I personally hurt many people. I can’t move forward by looking away from the past. That’s why I want to know, no matter what, the beginning of everything.”

“.....Cella.....”

Kazlow met Yuna's eyes with hesitation. Her eyes were red and shook as if she were about to cry soon.

"Far from being bright days, to you life at this orphanage was extremely painful. Do you still want to know?"

"Yes, please tell me."

Yuna displayed absolutely no hesitation. She wanted to show Kazlow that she hadn't come here to visit on light feelings.

".....That's right, it's your past. I'm not the one who should decide what to do with it."

Kazlow looked down and released a sigh.

"I understand. Then, let us talk. I'm not sure where I should start but, ah yes, won't you come with me? There's something I'd like you both to see."

Following Kazlow, who seemed to stand up to throw off her doubts, Yuna and Asyut also stood from their seats. There were deep wrinkles carved into the side of Kazlow's face. They looked more like wrinkles that had appeared from troubles which piled up than from age. Yuna felt like she had been a much happier and lively woman in the past. It seemed that the past here wasn't painful to just Celiastina. She was sure that it was the same for Kazlow herself.

When Kazlow opened the door of the drawing room, she pulled back quickly in surprise. Yuna, wondering what happened, peered over at the other side of the door. There stood several children who looked at each other with awkward faces.

"Oh my, oh my. What's wrong with everyone?"

"Director-teacher."

One of the children looked up at Kazlow clingly.

"Teacher, did something happen?"

"What do you mean?"

"Because, teacher, when we said that a big sister from the past came, you were really

surprised and ran to meet her."

"Ah, I'm sorry. That would surprise you all, huh."

Kazlow slowly crouched and stroked the heads of the children. Yuna couldn't see anything but her back, but she was sure Kazlow was smiling gently because the childrens' stiff expressions loosened little by little.

"It's not that something happened; this is a happy reunion. It's been a long time, so I'd like to talk more with this big sister. Can you all play amongst yourselves?"

"K-Kay."

Is everything really okay? The small eyes seemed to say as they flickered at Yuna and Asyut before running away.

"Hey, come on, everyone. Don't trouble the director and her guests. Let's go already."

The young boy who received Yuna and Asyut at the beginning appeared around the corner of the hall and pushed the childrens' backs. He was still far from being an adult, but he seemed to have the role of gathering the children at the orphanage.

"What's with that, Ruth, you were the one who asked us to come check things out."

A precocious young girl pouted and protested. The young boy, who was called Ruth, turned red and raised his voice.

"Stupid! Don't say extra things!"

"It's not extra."

"Shut up."

With a red face Ruth turned to Yuna and the others and bowed his head before leaving the place with the children, looking like he was carrying them all. As they watched them leave, Yuna exchanged looks and smiles with the other two. She felt like the tension in their feelings eased by a little bit.

Brought by Kazlow, the three of them arrived at the backyard of the orphanage.

The greenery was overgrown with small flowers blooming here and there. There were also trees here with rare fruit. It was not cleanly managed but there were signs of human handiwork and it did not have an impression of being wild.

Yuna enjoyed the sound of stepping on grass while she squinted her eyes against the sunlight filtering in through the trees. This backyard hadn't changed much. She remembered well that, whenever she came to the orphanage, she spent the majority of her time here.

"As you can see, this place is sunny, and so it's a favorite place for all the children."

As Kazlow said this she walked directly to the wall of the building. The wall was covered by a gentle green vine plant, whose small light pink flowers seemed to flow down from the top like lace.

"-This is..."

Yuna caught her breath when she looked up at the plant. It was like a waterfall..... But, could this be-.

A young Cella was always by herself here, crouching. Because she wanted to take care of the plants she was alone and didn't join the circle of friends.

"Do you remember?"

Kazlow stared intently at Yuna with hope in her eyes.

".....To think it grew to be this big."

At Yuna's unconscious murmur, Kazlow nodded happily.

"Furthermore, its flowers are blooming. Even though it's an asiatic jasmine."

"I-Is that so."

"Is this a special plant?"

Asyut, who was unable to see the conversation, opened his mouth reservedly.

“This asiatic jasmine in and of itself is not special; it’s actually the model of what it should look like. But the flowers of an asiatic jasmine only bloom for a short period of time in a year. And this is not the season for it.”

“You know a lot, Cella. –But.”

Kazlow slowly looked up at the wall in front of them again with nostalgic eyes.

“This asiatic jasmine’s flowers have been blooming all year round. It’s almost been fifteen years, and it’s still blooming.”

“Still?”

“Yes, it has never withered once. Because it received your blessings.”

“My... blessings...”

“That’s right. Your blessings as a saint. I’m certain this is your ability.”

–No way! Yuna shook her head reflexively, because she knew. Saint Celiastina’s ability should be amplifying the “death” of those she connected with. And it was actually due to that power that many people died.

“What do you mean?”

Asyut, seeming to feel the same doubts, asked for an explanation.

“This plant was planted by Cella when she was still young. It was a time when everyone at the orphanage was to grow their own plant. Cella put in her utmost effort to care for hers. During that time, there were children who grew bored and gave up caring for their plants midway, but Cella was the most passionate. Mysteriously, this asiatic jasmine matured at an unnatural speed. Normally, it would take five years for this wall to be covered, but in two years it grew to a point where its flowers seemed to spill over and fall.”

Yuna also knew that Cella worked hard to care for this asiatic jasmine. She had really treasured this plant.

As Yuna listened to Kazlow’s explanation, she reached out gently to the asiatic jasmine. Its small flowers tickled her fingers.

“Even when Cella became Saint Celiastina and left the orphanage, this asiatic jasmine hasn’t forgotten to flower. And it’s not just this asiatic jasmine. The flowers that Cella planted don’t wither easily and, conversely, for flowers that have withered, if Cella gives her love to them, they regain their health. It is said that, for generations, the saints are endowed with mysterious powers. I believe Cella’s saintly power is to encourage the growth of plants.”

“If that’s the case, then Lady Celiastina’s power at the royal palace...”

Asyut opened his mouth and seemed to have trouble saying it. Without needing to ask, Yuna knew what he was saying.

“A saint has never had two or more powers, right? Then, in either case, one is unrelated to my ability and is nothing more than a “coincidence””

“Coincidence you say...”

While Yuna and Asyut talked, Kazlow looked up at the asiatic jasmine which was spread like a curtain. Yuna noticed sorrow and uneasiness on Kazlow’s profile, which seemed to chase her, and once again turned to face her.

“Kazlow.”

Kazlow bit her lip hard.

“Kazlow, you seem to know more about something else, don’t you? And that’s why you have such a pained look, right?..... The ability that I’ve experienced up to now as a saint has been completely different. It’s an ability that is frightening to put to words; an abominable one. If you know anything about that then...”

A painful silence dominated the area.

The silence, which was thought to continue endlessly, was broken first by a gentle gust of wind that blew through. As that breeze swiped back the bangs on her helpless face, Kazlow gave a small nod.

“I know. There’s no way I don’t know. Because the very moment your power was distorted, I just stayed silent and watched.”

Looking away from the asiatic jasmine, Kazlow faced Yuna directly.

“Could you come with me some more? There’s another place I would like to guide you to.”

The next place they went was to the top of a small hill, which was a short walk after exiting from the back of the orphanage.

On that hill, which barely had anything apart from the green of vegetation, was a single neat grave, and the only thing that drew the eye.

Yuna read the name on the tombstone but it was unfamiliar to her. Noie Risban. When she looked at the age of death, the person seemed to have died more than ten years ago. Just a bit before Yuna came to play at the orphanage. Moreover, what caught her attention was that the person seemed to have died at the young age of seven.

“This is?”

“The grave of your childhood friend, Cella.”

Kazlow rearranged the bouquet of flowers in front of the grave which had been blown into a mess by the wind.

“And the daughter of the previous director. She was a bright and energetic girl who pulled you around, since you were a bit shy. The two of you always played together.”

“.....She died young.”

Yes, Kazlow said with a solemn nod. Her tight expression, which seemed to say that this was the beginning of everything, made Yuna stiffen.

“Noie died because of an accident on this hill.”

“Accident?”

“It was a very unfortunate accident. No one could have done anything.”

Kazlow sighed. When Kazlow said that no one could have done anything, it sounded like she was persuading herself and admonishing someone who was not here.

“When Noie was playing on this hill, it seemed like a gust of wind blew through. She fell to the bottom of the hill. Unfortunately, she struck her head hard and, though she held on for a short while, in the end she passed away without waking after half a month.”

Kazlow closed her eyes. Her somber expression looked like she was giving a silent prayer to the young girl whose life was quickly taken away by an unlucky fate.

“Noie was a central presence in the orphanage, and so her death gave everyone a huge shock. Especially to her parents, one of which was the director at the time, and his grief was very deep. Of course, there aren’t any parents who wouldn’t be devastated by the death of their own child. But the director loved his daughter to the point where, if it could save Noie’s life, he would be willing to sacrifice his own life or the life of others. Even his wife was sometimes exasperated..... Ah, I’m speaking ill of him. He really wasn’t a person who would neglect others for his daughter. However, his beloved daughter’s death completely eroded his spirit.”

Kazlow opened her eyes again and looked at the tombstone.

“At the time, Noie didn’t fall from the hill alone.”

She hadn’t been alone. Then, who had been with her?

“Cella, she was with you.”

Yuna’s heart jumped with a loud thud.

“Both of you were playing as usual, joking and running around. A sudden wind then pushed the two of you, and you both tumbled down the hill. However, you came out of that with scratches and scrapes. You pushed your small body to its limits to carry back Noie, who was limp and unmoving. I can still remember clearly..... the sight of you sobbing for help for Noie.”

Noie had been taken to a doctor immediately but the doctor’s expression had been extremely hard. His cruel prognosis had been that she wouldn’t be able to make it to the next day. Cella had clung to Noie, who was on the bed with closed eyes, and bawled. The director and his wife had stood still on the side and looked down at their beloved daughter in a daze. Kazlow, unable to endure being in the same room a second longer, had turned around.

However, contrary to the doctor's words, Noie had continued breathing the next morning. And the next morning too, and the morning after that, her faint breathing could certainly be heard. That's why a small hope began to be born inside the orphanage. Noie's life, which had been said to not have a day, continued on thinly like this. Perhaps, she'd even wake up soon and look up at them with clear green eyes-.

Kazlow spoke about how that hope had been eventually crushed but, during that time, the director's spirit had been unmistakably exhausted more and more. Sometimes he sat around without moving for hours like a bronze statue and, at other times, he acted strangely cheerful and would smile widely. He probably didn't know how to deal with his own heart which drifted in the space between hope and despair.

"The director's interactions with you, Cella, looked normal at first after Noie died. Although the director's wife clearly began to avoid you, the adults around felt that the director endured well. Cella, you did nothing wrong, but both you and Noie went through the same thing and yet the difference is like heaven and earth; complex feelings and questions as to why it became like this were probably unavoidable. Despite this though, the director loved you, Cella, as usual. In fact, he seemed to favor you more than the other children, but I thought he was worried about your mental hurt, and so I was moved by how he was a man of character."

But, she was mistaken, Kazlow said as she shook her head.

"Some time after Noie had passed away, you looked visibly spiritless, Cella. You were like that after the accident, but this was different from the sorrow of losing a friend and was some other kind of depression. When I asked the reason, during a moment we were alone, you cried and brought this up, "I'm not Noie. Right, teacher? But maybe I need to put up with it. Because I couldn't save Noie""

Kazlow had tried to ask for more details, but Cella didn't say anything further. In order to know the true meaning of those words, Kazlow had watched over Cella whenever she had the time. And then she finally noticed it. The attitude the director had towards Cella was... strange. It was too peculiar.

To put it briefly, the director was too affectionate to Cella.

He had treated Cella as if she were his world's most precious and beloved daughter. To the point where he had pushed Cella to replace his daughter, who was no longer here.

“Furthermore, that was how it was on the surface. He superficially loved you, Cella, but it felt like in his heart he rejected her. The more I paid attention the more blatant his attitude seemed. In truth, the director couldn’t forgive you for being the only one saved, Cella, and the reality that you were alive but Noie was dead. And so he hated you greatly, Cella.”

Not once had the director been personally vicious and hurt Cella. On the surface, he had always treated her kindly. With a gentle and full of love – or so that’s how it looked – attitude. However, the truth was different. I hate you, had been said underneath his smile.

“Cella, you probably didn’t know what to do, huh. Even if you wanted to run away, you weren’t able to run away. Moreover, because you felt responsible for Noie’s death, you resigned yourself to accepting the director’s warped treatment. The director’s wife also never said anything and, around that time, they divorced and she left the orphanage. I too didn’t know what the right thing to do was. Because he was the perfect “father” on the surface, I hesitated over whether I should condemn him and separate you from him, Cella. I believe I sympathized with the director and thought he was acting unconsciously. Now that I think about it though, I should have separated you two by force.”

Kazlow talked about how the director must have noticed early on that Cella had the Holy Mark – the proof of a saint – tattooed on her. But still, he wasn’t able to let her go. Perhaps he was stubbornly convinced that if she disappeared from his eyes then, this time, he would lose his “daughter”.

“Cella, you earnestly endured this. Except for that one time you confided a piece of your mind to me, you didn’t say anything to anyone else. But your heart certainly suffered. Gradually, abnormal events began to happen around you, Cella. Though, at the time, we didn’t notice it at first.”

“.....What happened?”

Yuna asked that question, but the answer was obvious.

“The children who were close to you, Cella... began to die one by one.”

As if every single word was a blade that cut, Kazlow’s face twisted with hurt at her own words.

"The cause of death was varied: such as sickness, suffocation from something stuck in the throat, or falling down the stairs. That's why, at the beginning, we thought it was a series of unfortunate coincidences. But everyone started to notice faintly... that it was only the children who were close to Cella who died."

It was most likely that no one had said it out loud to confirm it. The contents were something to hesitate over saying out loud and, if everyone's opinions were in agreement, there was no one who could answer as to how to move from here. And so they had stayed silent; the children and staff began to keep a distance from Cella, and treated her with the utmost care. Everyone, except for the director.

The director had concentrated more and more on Cella. Because no one would come close to Cella, he must have felt all the more that she was his possession. And yet, inside the director, his hatred towards Cella became greater.

And as Cella matured, the conflict of being unable to keep her close at hand was finally born – in the worst case he knew she had to receive the ceremony of becoming a saint before she was fifteen years old – in the end, it became clear to everyone that the director was wild.

He tried to rape Cella.

The person himself had said nothing about what he was thinking at the time. He must have thought, when he was thinking about the best way to hurt Cella while loving her, that there was nothing to do but this.

However, luckily it ended as an attempt. No matter how uncomfortable they were with Cella, they weren't inhuman enough to stay silent and watch a frail girl at her wits end be assaulted. For the first time, Kazlow, and a few other people, stopped the director and somehow protected Cella. At that moment, the Holy Mark on Cella's neck was revealed and, following that, she was sent out to the royal palace.

Hearing this story, Yuna thought back upon the time she visited the orphanage again.

Noie was already gone by the time Yuna came. Cella was often alone but she didn't feel as if Cella had been left out from the others. Yes, there had also been a male director. He was always smiling and when he gave sweets to Cella he also gave Yuna some. Her judgement as a child had been that he was a nice man.

That time might have been the very last moment the orphanage had been able to maintain their shaky equilibrium.

No, at that time, Cella must have already had the seeds of misfortune that would continue into the future. She was suffering from the director's twisted love, and secretly seeking help. And then Yuna left the orphanage without noticing that. If she had noticed Cella's pain at the time, perhaps something might have been different.

Celiastina's words in the white world, "I despise you", was brought back to her mind again.

"Did no one really notice Cella's Holy Mark until that time?"

"At least I didn't notice it. Come to think of it, the director had always hated it when the staff took care of things around you, Cella. It was probably him and a few others who knew."

"Why was it not reported immediately to the royal palace?"

"I believe it was the director's idea. But I don't know the reason."

If Celiastina had been welcomed into the palace the moment she came to the orphanage... Yuna couldn't help but think about that.

"Then, at the very least, when I was sent to the royal palace, you should have reported the ability."

As Yuna continued on that topic, Kazlow nodded without any strength.

".....That's right. But, no one could say anything."

"....."

The people around the young Cella didn't stop her hurt from heading into a bad direction. They must have been drawn into the flow of the days and their surface-level calm. After incomprehensible deaths swooped down on the orphanage, they cowered even more and couldn't move. So, when Cella's Holy Mark was unexpectedly found, they drove her out of the orphanage on this fortune. Moreover, the royal palace side was not informed at all about Cella's twisted ability. Even though, if a single word had been said, maybe fate could have been greatly changed.

(Why did things just keep heading in a bad direction.)

But she couldn't only blame Kazlow.

If she had been in Kazlow's position, what would she have done? She might have chosen the same road of running away. She might have sympathized with the director's circumstances too and, even if it looked somewhat distorted, if he was giving affection then she couldn't deny that head-on. If Cella herself barely made any complaints, then she would be belittling Cella's strength. Even after finally knowing the depths of Cella's wounds with the appearance of her twisted ability, she wouldn't have been able to act. If she supported Cella warmly then one day she may become that ability's prey and lose her life. She thought that was terrifying. She was sure that even she would be prepared to run.

She could also understand the thoughts of the people at the orphanage and why they didn't report this ability to the royal palace. They might have had to answer for how Cella was raised up to now and, in the first place, they would have been hesitant to even say that the holy messenger of God had a cursed ability. If they had thought this was a punishment for blasphemy against God, then it was unavoidable that they would be taciturn.

Besides, they might have had a small hope too. If her surroundings changed, perhaps Cella's power would be at peace. If she left the director, who was the main cause of her suffering, and the orphanage, that reminded her of painful days, and lived in an entirely changed environment then perhaps...

Of course, that was nothing more than a selfish hope on the orphanage's side, but that possibility must have been extremely attractive. It wouldn't be strange if Kazlow and the others had wanted to bet on that.

“.....But why did you stay at this orphanage, Kazlow?”

Yuna asked that question instead of blaming Kazlow.

“Even with me gone, life didn't return to how it was before, right? This orphanage has changed a lot since then.”

For instance, she couldn't see the previous director here right now. Instead, Kazlow introduced herself as the director. Also, from what the children before said, everything in the orphanage was replaced. Since then, the children who were here before- the

“generation before” also did not turn up at this orphanage.

“Yes, it’s just like you said. After the orphanage sent you out, it was closed for a time.”

“Was that by the orders of the royal palace?”

“No, that wasn’t it. It was a request from the orphanage. We were really foolish, because we thought everything would calm down once you left the orphanage. But the reality was different. After you were gone, the orphanage’s atmosphere became much worse.”

The staff, who had tried their hardest to be cautious of Cella up to then, finally confronted their own disgrace. They lost all trust in the director who attempted rape, and the orphanage completely fell apart. Staff after staff left and, finally, the orphanage lost its faculty.

“Did the previous director continue working even after I went to the royal palace as a saint?”

“At the beginning. Because the fact of his attempted assault on you was hidden. But still, rumors spread in the blink of an eye to the public. At any rate, in the end, the previous director soon left the orphanage at his own decision.”

“The children from the “generation before”.....”

“The royal palace searched for caretakers. In truth, the orphanage was supposed to be completely shutdown. But, on second thought, I wanted to keep this orphanage going. So the previous director transferred his rights, I re-qualified for the requirements, and applied to the royal palace again..... and this is where it lead to.”

Kazlow answered even that with an apologetic and quiet voice.

“Even I don’t know exactly why I thought to stay at this orphanage. It’s just- I believe I wanted to make the children happy this time. Because I couldn’t protect you, at least I could protect someone else. I suppose I wanted to atone...”

After that, Yuna and the others returned to the orphanage again and toured the other rooms.

While being shown all the places that the past Celiastina enjoyed, she felt like there was a small Cella running through the institution lively footsteps. Beside her were Yuna's own young footprints following her.

But, in reality, Celiastina didn't exist anywhere.

Cella was no longer here. Celiastina also wasn't here. She was asleep in a place no one knew about.

(Even though there are so many memories of you in this place.)

Kazlow had said that she looked after the children here as a way of atoning. But, at the same time, she might have been waiting for Celiastina at this orphanage. Even while thinking that Celiastina would never come back again, she had resolved to continue waiting for her entire life.....

Opening the rusted gate, which wouldn't have changed since the past, a modest front yard flooded with sunlight would be spread out in front of her. Continuing on slowly, the laughter of children would be heard leaking from the building. And, on the other side of the door, Kazlow would appear with a smile and welcome her in a voice that enveloped her- "Welcome home".

(It's like I thought...)

In the orphanage, where a gentle light shone, Yuna could not help but feel sorrow.

(Celiastina can't be gone.)

Celiastina had to return to this place. And she had to face her own eyes and heart. There were a lot of things left here that she had to face. Things that were waiting for Celiastina alone.....

(I know that, but still I...)

Asyut, who walked beside her, had been completely silent. Yuna knew that was his utmost consideration for her. Asyut himself must have had many more things he wanted to ask and know. And he had the right to break this silence and ask Kazlow. And yet, Asyut gave priority to Yuna.

"Director-teacher!"

A small girl holding a flowerpot came running over from the other end of the hall. Following behind her appeared several other children.

“What’s wrong, you’re going to trip. And I thought I said there was to be no running in the halls.”

“Look, look, teacher. This flower bloomed. It’s pretty, right?”

The girl talked on and on, excited. Holding out the pot with a smile overflowing with happiness, she puffed out her chest with pride.

“.....Oh my, it really has. It’s bloomed beautifully.”

Kazlow crouched and faced the presented pot’s flower.

“Is this what Rurie grew?”

“Yep, I grew this one.”

“Oh my, is it already time for flowers to bloom?”

I was also surprised, shrugged an older girl – a staff member – who had caught up.

“When I saw it this morning, I thought the bud was still hard. But because Rurie worked so hard, the flower must have worked hard too.”

“But this should be a wallia flower, right? It’s supposed to bloom blue flowers.”

Right now, in the girl’s hands there was a light purple flower.

“.....I thinks that’s definitely a wallia flower.”

From between Kazlow and the others, who were looking at the flower strangely, Yuna spoke up unassumingly. Eh? All at once, everyone’s gazes concentrated on Yuna, seeking answers.

“Wallia flowers will bloom purple flowers but only very rarely. However, since they are rarely purple, the ones that have purple flowers are called “the light of hope from the heavens” in the language of flowers.”

“Oh my, really? Isn’t that amazing, Rurie. She’s saying purple flowers are special.”

“Really, big sister?”

The girl called Rurie looked up at Yuna with eyes that shone even more than before. When Yuna smiled and nodded, Rurie bounced on the spot, even more happy.

“It matches big sister’s eyes.”

“Eh?”

“Big sister’s eyes and my flower are the same color. Both are really pretty.”

At those innocent words, Yuna felt happiness and embarrassment well up. Feeling Asyut, who was beside her, look her way, she hurriedly crouched to hide her blush. Being on the same eye level as Rurie, Yuna stroked her hair while showing signs of embarrassment.

“Isn’t that nice, Rurie.”

“Not fair, I wonder if mine will bloom soon too.”

“I know, big sister, look at ours too! There are tons that are about to bloom!”

Having her arms grabbed by the children, Yuna was rushed from this place as her feet tangled.

“Wah, wait, wait. I’m going to trip!”

“Hurry, come! Look at mine first, okay?”

“Ah, you can’t do that, because the order has to be decided properly.”

“Teacher, big brother, come quickly too!”

Yuna gripped the warm hands of the children back as they pulled both her hands. They were small and very soft. When she held the hands of these innocent children, she felt saved from her low spirits.

“Hey, everyone, are you having fun every day?”

Yuna asked this as they ran. A lot of children looked back, smiling, and gave big nods.

“It’s really fun! And everyone gets along.”

“Teacher is kind too. I love her.”

“Big sister and the others should live here too.”

“Even if we don’t live here, we can always come and play.”

The words of the children, which were returned without any hesitation, sank directly into her heart.

“That’s right.”

She was glad this orphanage remained like this. She was glad it hadn’t been left decayed and with the laughter of children irrationally stolen away. She was glad Kazlow was here.

“I’m really... glad.”

“Huh, what was that, big sister?”

“No, it was nothing.”

Yuna shook her head and smiled.

(The rest is just my resolution.)

Once again, Yuna gently squeezed the hands of the children.

“If... if you feel like it again... please feel free to come here anytime.”

“Of course, Kazlow.”

At the entrance of the orphanage Kazlow and Yuna shook hands. It was around the time when it would shortly be dusk. It was just the right time for returning to the royal palace.

“.....Um, Cella.”

Kazlow murmured as her eyes dropped to their connected hands.

“I have one more thing to tell you.”

Looking up, Kazlow’s eyes grasped Yuna without wavering.

“It’s about Dankis, the previous director.”

“_”

“Right now, he’s the grave keeper at the graveyard on the outskirts of the forest. I haven’t met him but sometimes I see him shopping in the town, so I believe he is still there. He should be living alone ever since he left the orphanage.”

“Grave keeper.....”

“That’s what he himself wanted.”

Was that his way of making amends? Or was this the result of being exhausted after years and months of deceiving himself with his false love?

“Please decide for yourself what to do with him, Cella. You’re free to meet him or not to meet him.”

Yuna tried to call to mind the image of Dankis in her mind, but all she could bring up was his ever-present smile and she couldn’t actually remember what kind of person he was. The director’s outline, which was barely formed because of Kazlow’s story, told nothing to Yuna.

Yuna raised her head and faced the dazzling sun, squinting her eyes.

-There was still... some time.

What was she going to do? She was able to know everything she wanted to know. What Yuna searched for was now in her hands. It should be fine to return to the royal palace like this.

(But.....)

What was she hesitating over.

Was she herself going to meet the previous director? What was she supposed to do with meeting him?

She didn't know. She just knew that she didn't want to keep his existence ambiguous like this.

“.....Asyut.”

When she called his name and looked up at Asyut beside her, he gave her a nod, as if he understood everything.

“Let us go to him.”

Those words severed Yuna's hesitation. –That's right, she didn't have much time left. Even this one day, today, was Yuna's remaining time. However, that was precisely why she wouldn't hesitate to move.

They went to meet Dankis, the previous director.

Chapter Eleven

As they left the orphanage and went further on horse, the entrance to the forest appeared faster than she thought. And, indeed, there was a quiet graveyard spread out on their side of the forest. Not a lot of people seemed to come here and the hushed and lonely atmosphere made Yuna feel more and more depressed. She didn't think anyone would want to stay here long with the force of the dense forest approaching from behind.

“Please do not leave my side.”

Stopping the horse, Asyut murmured that while looking around at their surroundings. Feeling the tension in his form, Yuna also braced herself once more.

Looking out over this desolated ground, there was not a soul in sight. Instead, there were shabby tombstones dotting the grounds.

“There’s a cemetery even in a place like this, huh. I thought it was normal to have one in a church or on a hill or somewhere like that.”

“.....It’s most likely—“

Asyut got off the horse and held out a hand to Yuna. He helped her to the ground while supporting her firmly.

“—this isn’t a normal cemetery. I believe it is a cemetery for the poor who do not have citizenship, or a burial place for criminals.”

None of the graves had an offering of flowers. It was a graveyard where the remaining relatives would not turn around and look back on. However, the weeds weren’t overgrown to a point where they would block sight; they were maintained at the most minimum level. There was certainly someone that came here every now and then.

And it might be the previous director of the orphanage.

“There is a small cabin over there. Shall we take a look?”

There was a cabin where Asyut was looking. In a painful state where it could be mistaken for being abandoned, the house seemed to hide in the shadows of the trees as if embarrassed. When Yuna nodded, Asyut approached the cabin with her following behind.

Even when they came up directly to the cabin there were no sounds. Thinking that it might actually be abandoned as Asyut put his hand on the door, it ended up opening easily and anti-climactically. On the other side of the door, a single room spread out.

The room was furnished with the bare minimum necessary furniture, such as a table, a bed, and a shelf. All of them were worn and damaged like the cabin, but they did not seem unused. There was a presence that someone lived here. However, they were just away from home right now.

(He's... here. He really does live here.)

Yuna was assaulted with an inexplicable sense of nervousness. Thinking about the person who she had only ever met a few times, her body stiffened. It wasn't like he treated her horribly. And yet, Yuna's fingers steadily became colder due to her nervousness.

"No one seems to be here right now. Let us return home for today."

Asyut did not trespass deeply into the room. He spoke while remaining beside the entrance.

"But."

At the same time, Yuna didn't want to leave so easily. "For today" he said, but if they turned back here when would be the next time they could leave the royal palace? In the first place, she wasn't even sure if she had the time left to wait. If she didn't meet him now then she wouldn't meet him ever again. A premonition that was close to confidence rose up inside Yuna.

"Let's wait here a bit more. Once I'm convinced we're not going to see him, we can go home."

Convinced... how long would she wait for that to happen? An hour? Or around the time the sun was completely set?

“–Understood.”

Relieved at Asyut’s answer, Yuna let out a small sigh.

“Thank you. I’m sorry you’re always dragged into my selfish requests.”

“Please do not apologize, because I am not inconvenienced. But, as I mentioned earlier, do not leave my side for any reason.”

Okay, she said with a nod, and then looked around the room once more. But Dankis did not return with that action. Since it wasn’t proper to wait inside the house without its owner, the two passed the time outside the cabin.

“Hey, Asyut...”

While leaning against a tree, Yuna haltingly called out to Asyut.

Yuna and Asyut passed the time in silence for a short while after they exited the cabin but, when she thought about it, they never really had opportunities to talk leisurely to each other. She was curious about Asyut’s silence at the orphanage, and she wanted to hear what he thought about the truth of Celiastina.

“Were you surprised... by the past me?”

However, she didn’t know how to ask that and so she ended up speaking vaguely. Asyut watched with calm eyes as Yuna lowered her eyes to the ground and scuffed her toe against some weeds.

“Rather than being surprised, it was more a feeling of “Ah, so that’s how it was” and comprehension.”

“Comprehension?”

“At the orphanage where Lady Celiastina was raised, my feelings were unexpectedly calm. Furthermore, my feelings weren’t moved by any intense feelings of anger, sadness, or surprise, when I learned about her past. To me, Lady Celiastina’s past is like a distant world.”

Asyut's profile, as he spoke, was completely calm. To him, the Celiastina at the orphanage who constantly fought against loneliness as a little girl was another person. That little girl and the beauty who laughed harshly, behaved cruelly, and committed atrocious acts would never become one. Only, the origin that molded the saint was made clear, and this fact fell into their hearts with a thump. It was just that.

That being said, it wasn't that Asyut was indifferent. The Celiastina inside Asyut might have become too distorted of an existence for him to hold any sympathy or pity for. If his heart was moved to forgive all her sins after knowing her past, then Asyut might break this time from being unable to bear the weight of the past. Because Asyut managed to stand and walk to this point by hating Celiastina and cursing himself. It must be difficult to treat Yuna kindly, given who she was.

“In the end, no matter what truths I know, I cannot change my thoughts about our past. Of course, I will not impose my feelings onto you. I believe you should accept Lady Celiastina's past in your own way, as yourself.”

“You know, I'm really sad and frustrated. I wanted to scream and ask why nothing was done until everything became like this.”

Yuna jerked her head up and looked at the clouds that slowly flowed by. Her current feelings, which didn't seem to match the calm scenery, made her feel like crying.

“But you did not. You looked very calm.”

“Because I don't have that right. Even if I feel miserable after knowing Celiastina's past, I can't take that out on anyone. Because I...”

Am not Celiastina.

“Is that so?”

Asyut struck at Yuna with words that were in a slightly angry tone.

“Have you not been frantically accepting everyone's censure to Lady Celiastina up until now? Many people have been saved by that. Now it is time for you to be able to tell your feelings to someone.”

Yuna slowly shook her head.

“I’ve told everyone enough about my feelings up to now. But, I think this matter alone is different.”

It should be Celiastina herself who confronted this problem. It wasn’t an area that Yuna should step into.

“Then, why are you here like this, and meeting with the previous director, Dankis?”

–Why? Yuna asked herself this again.

Really, why? What was she planning to do when she met him?

“.....I...”

“If you are at a loss then–“

Asyut seemed to press for an answer even more with his words, but he appeared to see something beyond Yuna and his words cut off as his eyes widened with surprise. Yuna, following his gaze, turned around. Two shadows that were approaching them slowly entered her vision.

–Was that possibly...

As they came closer their features became clear. One was a young boy who was still very young. The other was a skinny elderly man; he was covered by filthy clothes, which made him look like a beggar, and carrying a paper bag. The bag was the only thing that looked brand new. That man walked – led by the young boy – and as he glanced at them with a lifeless expression, he looked like the walking dead. However, the moment his gaze took in Yuna, a light shone in his cloudy eyes. At the same time, the paper bag slipped out of his hands and fell to the floor with a thud. Potatoes rolled out onto the ground from the paper bag.

“Uah... ah!”

That man made a wordless noise. It was like a noise that came from an intense emotion. And then, with a swaying body, he ran over to them in a straight line; compared to the young boy who stood in the same place, bewildered.

When Yuna shrunk unconsciously and backed away, Asyut stepped forward as if to shield her. But the man didn’t care and came up directly in front of them, looking only

at Yuna as if Asyut didn't even exist.

"C-Cella. Cella. Is it you, Cella?"

The man called out her name over and over again in a low and trembling voice. Stop, don't say that name, rose a scream in Yuna's heart. It wasn't even her own name, and yet she couldn't bear this man saying it. –It was like the Celiastina inside Yuna was screaming.

"I can't believe you came to see me. I didn't think I would see you again while I was alive. Aah, I continued to beg God for forgiveness in this place. Did my feelings get through?"

Continuing to be excited, he stretched out his right hand to touch Yuna's cheek. But Asyut knocked away that hand sharply.

"Do not touch her. This lady isn't a being who you can touch. She is not your daughter–now, and back then."

At that firm voice, the man recoiled and drew back his hand. His gaze hesitantly jumped around his surroundings, and he was at a loss at this sudden situation that swooped down. His appearance was both comical and pitiful.

The young boy who had been left behind finally caught up, pulled the man's arm, and called out in a shocked voice.

"Calm down, old man."

"Uah... uuh."

"Who are you?"

Asyut directed his sharp look towards the young boy. The young boy shrugged his shoulders without any hesitation.

"The grave keeper's helper, I guess. I weed the graveyard over there..... This old man is a bit strange. It's best not to get involved."

Even though the young boy said these things point blank, the man had no reaction. He kept glancing at Yuna and then looking away.

Yuna swallowed audibly. She tried to calm her pounding heart, but it wasn't working. Now that she was meeting him face to face like this, she noticed a look of madness in his eyes, and suddenly grew afraid.

".....You're Dankis, aren't you."

Do not be swept away by his madness, Yuna told herself. She tried, as much as possible, to talk in a voice with suppressed emotions. Her voice probably didn't shake. The proof of that was how the man's face, when he nervously met Yuna's eyes again, was somewhat calmer than it was before.

He didn't nod to her question, but that in and of itself was an affirmation.

"You..."

Yuna didn't know what else to say. -She finally met him. She finally arrived to where this person – where the beginning – was. Yuna felt the strength leave her entire body.

Yuna raised her head and released a large sigh. Her nose stung.

"Cella, you came to see me, right?"

Dankis asked in a hesitant voice. Yuna, who was glaring up at the sky and trying not to cry, returned her gaze to Dankis again. Yes, she came to see him. That was right. However, for some reason she wasn't able to nod.

"Do you... hate me?"

Dankis' eyes shook with loneliness.

"That's right, of course you do. Because I treated you the wrong way."

"....."

"But please believe only in this. I truly loved you. It's not a lie, it's the truth. I just made a mistake in how I treated you, and I hurt you with that. I really regret it. That's why I've been spending my life from that day on in repentance. Cella, if you look at me now, you should understand how much regret I have."

It seemed like there was enough power in Dankis' words for him to speak. The

madness inside him was once again swelling and overflowing. And, as if words weren't enough to convey half of his thoughts, half-way through he bent his body towards Yuna to sidle up to her. The young boy beside him hurriedly pulled Dankis' arm, but it was like Dankis did not even notice that. Yuna felt disgusted enough to want to run away from Dankis, but an anger that was greater than that rooted her to the ground.

“Don’t come closer.”

As soon as she clearly rejected him, Dankis seemed to become flustered. He had been doing the same thing over and over again. He fluctuated between insanity and sanity, before Yuna and Asyut appeared here, ever since he left the orphanage- no, perhaps even further back in the past.

“Dankis.”

Yuna called out that name while feeling helpless.

“It’s true that I came all this way to see you. But it wasn’t to reconcile with you. I... can’t reconcile with you.”

Dankis’ expression twisted horribly. With his expression like that, he opened his mouth to say something. However, she didn’t want to hear it. Yuna couldn’t accept Dankis’ words any more than this. To say nothing of forgiving him in view of those words. Because she wasn’t Celiastina.

“It’s not something..... I can do.”

Yuna murmured that, as if through gritted teeth, while she looked away from Dankis.

“Wait, wait, Cella! How much do you think I loved you? It’s because I love you even now that I’m suffering from the acknowledgement of my crime!”

She couldn’t listen to him. Don’t listen, don’t listen, don’t listen.

“If you don’t understand that then I can’t be saved! Save me, Cella! I’ve been waiting for you all this time. Save me!”

Don’t liste-.

Yuna shut her eyes tightly. However, at the same time, she realized there was a part of

her that desperately took in his words. There was certainly something in her that braced herself so as to not miss a single word from him.

“Cella, we can still reconcile. You must have come here for that.”

(As if!)

She wanted to shout that. But, if that was the case, why did she come here?

She... she...

Once again a feeling of wanting to cry assaulted Yuna. It came like a tall wave surging towards her, threatening to sweep Yuna entirely away.

No, she mustn't cry. Yuna scolded herself again, while being exasperated at how much of a crybaby she was. However, at the same time, an understanding came upon her.

Celiastina, I understand, your feelings.

This helpless sorrow, this incomprehensible anger, and this despair enough to make everything in front of her eyes pitch dark–.

Right now, she was certainly experiencing it powerfully; Celiastina's existence– her certainty and her strong feelings.

“Cella, only you can save me. From the moment I saw you, I truly loved you as a special being. That's why I couldn't give you to the royal palace and raised you dearly and preciously at my hands. Your Holy Mark exists to protect the country and me, who is your parent. Right, Cella?”

Dankis' voice became soft enough to be seen, seeming to attract Yuna's attention as she remained looking down.

(As I thought–)

He knew about Celiastina's Holy Mark. And he hadn't let her go due to a selfish logic.

From the start.

Yuna, who clenched her teeth hard, jerked her head up.

(Celiastina, you have to properly express the feelings you have right now in your heart to him. You really can't disappear like this, leaving things as they are.)

Celiastina herself had to confront him.

-But, but.

She wasn't Celiastina. And so she couldn't judge Dankis in her place. However, as *Yuna*, there was a mountain of things she wanted to say to Dankis. To the point where she wanted to yell and scream loudly!

Dankis, was glared at by Yuna's sharp eyes, slowly closed his mouth, which had been trying to curry favor with her. Overpowered, he completely cowered.

"Why do you think Cella can save you?"

This time it was Yuna's voice which trembled. That was how great her anger was.

"For what reason have you been living here alone?"

"C-Cella..."

"What exactly are you repenting for? I don't understand. Haven't you not changed at all from the past? You say you truly loved Cella but everything was a disastrous mismatch, so how can you still say that? You've just continued to run away. You haven't faced your own feelings at all. Are you still trying to capture Cella by justifying things to yourself and staying miserable?"

"N-No. That's wrong, I....."

"It's not wrong! Why haven't you properly faced your own feelings? You might have really loved Cella, but it wasn't just that, right? What did you really think about Cella, who was troubled the more you poured love into her?"

"I-"

Dankis staggered and took a step back.

"I..."

“You?”

“I..... truly... loved Cella.”

“Is that your truth?”

“It’s the truth, it’s the truth!!”

Dankis shook his head like a child throwing a tantrum.

“If your daughter were to stand in front of you right now, could you still pretend to be blind to everything?”

Dankis’ shoulders jolted as he gave a large shudder.

“Could you say that you loved Cella from the bottom of your heart, while looking away from your daughter?”

“.....”

Dankis’ face was as white as paper now. His eyes weren’t in focus, to the point where she wondered if he really couldn’t see. He was facing Yuna, but it was like he was looking for something else.

“.....I... loved Cella.”

“.....”

“Loved.....”

“.....”

Ahhh, Dankis’ sigh was like a sob.

“Stop, don’t make me think.”

“Dankis.”

“.....guh!”

Dankis shook his head several times. Was he trying to run away from confronting his own heart? Or...

“M-My... daughter was.....”

Suddenly, Dankis began to mutter intermittently in a shaking voice. It was terribly forlorn, and much more unsteady than the way he had talked before. It was as if he was ignoring the flow up to now, and was trying to start another topic, but maybe this was necessary to reach Dankis “beginning”.

“My daughter... was a very adorable girl. Everyone praised her for being lovable. She was bright and innocent, and always had a smile. This kind of daughter was even more precious to me as her parent. She was an irreplaceable treasure to me.....”

Yuna did not open her mouth, she simply continued to watch Dankis intently.

“When I gave my daughter love, she also returned love to me. I was happy with just that. I thought I was the happiest person in the world. -And yet, on that day, my daughter suddenly-“

Didn’t return. The sound was faint, and the words were only determined by the movement of his lips.

“The love that overflowed in me for my daughter had no place to go. My daughter was no longer here. Where was I to put my affections? I was scared of my overwhelming love that had no place to go. My lost love and helplessness changed to hate against something. And then I was terrified of myself. That’s why... that’s why... I decided to love Cella, who was cherished in the past as a holy girl, like a daughter. I would give her my utmost love.”

Dankis continued to speak cautiously. Rather than choosing his words, it was more like he was taking care so as to not stray from his true feelings.

“But... that... didn’t go well.”

At last, his voice was more faint than the sound of a flying mosquito.

“I didn’t love Cella well. Even though I thought to love her. My heart hurt a bit whenever I tried to make Cella happy. Conversely, when I saw her scared, I felt satisfied for some reason. But there was a moment where I was even more content. And that

was when I saw Cella trembling from my love.”

“Why were you satisfied?”

“Even though she hated it, she didn’t reject me. I felt like I was controlling the Holy Daughter. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“I thought that my daughter was happy. I was able to convince myself that dying after falling from the hill was better than being saved. That it was better for my daughter to have died at that time.”

“You couldn’t have Cella becoming happier than your daughter”

“I did think that a little. But I didn’t hate you from the bottom of my heart... I shouldn’t have. I really did think that, as the saint, you would have to leave the orphanage eventually. And I hoped you would walk on a path of happiness after that, without getting involved with me ever again.”

Yuna slowly shook her head.

“But she couldn’t have become happy. Cella, who became Celiastina, had never been happy even once. She’s only continued to suffer.”

Dankis’ face twisted, and a sob leaked out.

“Cella, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.....”

“Don’t apologize.”

No matter how much he apologized, that voice wouldn’t reach the person it was to reach.

“The Cella you knew no longer exists. No matter how many times you apologize to me, it won’t reach her.”

“What should I do, Cella. I can’t... it’s hopeless. I don’t know what I should do by myself. Please, stay beside me.”

Dankis must have felt Yuna withdrawing from him, because once again glimpses of insanity could be seen in him.

“Hey. I don’t really get this, but are you two this geezer’s old friends?”

The young boy, who had been silent beside Dankis all this time, opened his mouth with a bothered look.

“If so, then do something for him. It’s been a long time since he spoke properly like this.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

Yuna shook her head. It might be thought of as cold-hearted, but Dankis wasn’t a person for Yuna to extend a hand to out of compassion.

“Then why’d you come. I can’t see this as anything but you two bullying this old man. Are you just going to say everything you wanted to say then head on home not caring about what happens later?”

Yuna and Asyut looked at each other but neither of them said anything. The boy continued to speak, as if he couldn’t accept that.

“If you go home like this, this person’ll be all alone again. He’ll probably be alone until he dies, spending every lonely day suffering from his memories..... that’s too harsh.”

It wasn’t just Yuna and Asyut who were silently listening to the young boy. Dankis, who was hanging his head, started to shake again. His pallor darkened to a color like dirt.

“.....no.....”

Something was strange about Dankis. Suddenly, he trembled violently to their eyes.

“No, no, NO! I don’t want to suffer alone! I don’t want to be lonely anymore!!”

“!”

“If you won’t be beside me then there’s no meaning! Death would be better! Cella, you too! There’s no meaning in you living!”

Dankis, whose emotions erupted, took out a dagger from between the potatoes which had rolled out of the paper bag on the ground. Taking it in hand, he raised his head and his eyes were dreadfully bloodshot.

“—!!”

An unpleasant *deja vu* assailed Yuna.

“We’ll die together, Cella!”

Dankis threw himself at her in a tangle of limbs. However, Asyut stood in front of Yuna again and, with a calm motion, swept Dankis’ feet to the side. When Dankis fell, Asyut kicked his right hand and sent the dagger flying out of his hand. Yuna thought it was over with that, but Asyut did not relax his vigilance. He pulled out the sword that was fastened to his back and took up a stance in silence.

“A-A-Are you going to kill me? I don’t care. I’ll take Cella with me!”

Even though Dankis was unarmed, he didn’t have a scared expression, and instead crawled on the ground trying to charge at Yuna again. His ghastly state made Yuna shudder as a chill ran down her spine. No, not just her spine, but from the top of her head to the tip of her toes. She was frozen stiff and could not move from that spot.

“Stop it, old man!”

The young boy shouted firmly from behind as he tried to stop Dankis, but the man did not falter. While Dankis shook off the young boy who was pulling at the sleeves of his jacket, the only thing reflected in his eyes was Yuna.

Yuna was paralyzed but somehow she managed to return to herself at the young boy’s voice. She saw Asyut’s right arm tense as he stood in front of her, shielding her.

“W-Wait, Asyut. Stop, please don’t kill Dankis!”

Yuna unconsciously clung to Asyut’s back. In the moment that Asyut looked back at Yuna, Dankis wrapped himself around Asyut’s right foot.

“Kill, kill them, kill me too!”

Dankis’ unfocused eyes wandered through the empty air as he continued to shout. Kill,

kill everyone.

While looking down at Dankis, Yuna felt a nervousness gradually rise deep within her.

–Who was he talking to?

At first, she thought it was a meaningless shout at Asyut.

But, no. This was different. He was speaking to someone completely different, and with a precise meaning.

Then who exactly was he speaking to?

Yuna looked at the young boy right away, but he was just looking down at Dankis with an open mouth, struck dumb. –No, it wasn't him.

And then, at that moment, human shapes suddenly leapt out from the shadows of the trees surrounding the graveyard. Not just one person. –In total there were five. Each one held a sword.

“Wha.....”

“They came.”

As Asyut muttered lowly, he used his left hand to pull Dankis off his foot with all his strength, and then hurled Dankis' body at the assassins rushing towards them. Two of them were caught by that and collapsed to the ground in a cloud of dust. Additionally, Asyut grabbed two potatoes in his empty left hand and threw them quickly at two others. One was hit directly in the face, but the other twisted his upper body and dodged it. However, in that space, Asyut had already dashed towards him. Coming up to the man, Asyut raised his sword and thrusted it through the other man's thigh without hesitation. GUAH, a terrible scream echoed through the graveyard.

“Lady Celiastina, over here!”

Yuna, who suddenly came back to herself, ran over to Asyut as directed. Meanwhile, Asyut took the sword the other man was carrying and threw it at the men who had been caught under Dankis. It struck the stomach of one of the men who had started to stand up.

By the time Yuna managed to get behind Asyut and raise her head to look around him, two of the assassins were already closing in on them. While Yuna swallowed back her scream, Asyut firmly caught one of the lunging swords with his own. In a blink, when the sword was thrust aside, Asyut reached out his left hand, grabbed the other man's collar and threw him to the right. The second man, who had been swinging his sword down, stabbed it into that man's back. A shrill scream rose from the stabbed man. Yuna reflexively shut her eyes. However, this wasn't the time to be afraid. She had to look at the situation properly and move.

Asyut threw a merciless punch at the assassin who was struggling to pull his sword out of his companion's back. Adding a kick at that defenceless upper body, the man collapsed onto his back and Asyut thrusted his sword down on the man's right foot. – Only one remained now.

“H-Hiiee!”

But the last one did not come towards Asyut. Grabbing the neck of the young boy who was cowering beside him, the man brought his sword to that neck.

“Drop your sword. If you don't, I'll kill this kid.”

“Uwah, l-let me go!”

The boy tried to resist by kicking both feet, but it was without any force. Asyut stopped moving for the first time and glared at his opponent.

“.....”

“Come on, hurry up and drop your sword. Now!”

“A-Asyut.....”

Yuna peeked at the side of Asyut's face from his back. She wasn't able to read from his grim expression whether he was hesitating or if he had already resolved himself and decided. Only the boy's pained groans echoed on the spot.

“Very well.”

Asyut said this in a low voice and tossed away the sword in his hand. “Now, release that boy.”

“.....Ha, haha!”

The assassin’s cheeks were pulled up as he gave a dry laugh.

“That was awfully quick. Are you saying that, even unarmed, I’m no match for you alone? If that’s the case, you’ve made a terrible miscalculation.”

The air trembled along with the man’s words.

And, at the same, there was the sound of grass rustling.

It was only for a moment that she felt this was unusual. Faster than understanding what that unusualness was, multiple shadows jumped in front of them. The shadows—were new assassins. There was close to ten people, even more than before. Yuna and Asyut were completely surrounded; in an instant, the tables were turned.

“Because it’s like this.”

The man, who had been the “last one” seconds before, gave a daring grin and threw the young boy roughly away.

“OW!”

Yuna immediately tried to help the boy up, but Asyut grabbed her arm and she couldn’t move.

“Celiastina, we didn’t think you’d really appear in such a place. Thanks to that, our plans have gone awry— but let’s think that it’s fallen in a good direction.”

Together with his words, there was the sound of ten people stepping forward.

There was no doubt that it was unreasonable even for someone like Asyut to take on ten people while protecting a woman and child. In such a hopeless situation, Yuna felt like she would faint this time. If Asyut hadn’t been supporting her, she might have collapsed on the spot.

But then.

The situation, as it was, did not bring despair.

What followed was a completely different development. The new assassins, who had suddenly appeared, were then surrounded by even more human shapes, who appeared from the bushes.

(Huh?)

There were about ten men who had appeared from the bushes with fearless expressions. They were silent as they held their swords out and took up a combative position- but.

The sharp glint in their eyes was not directed at Yuna and Asyut. They were looking at the assassins.

(What is this?)

“Honestly, they’re too slow.”

Asyut muttered this. At the same time Yuna looked up at Asyut, the familiar voice of a large man leapt into her ears.

“Oo, you guys alright?”

“S-Sieg!?”

The person that appeared with a bold smile and bright atmosphere, which was inappropriate here, was Siegcrest.

“Go.”

Siegcrest gave a quiet word. Simultaneously, the men charged at the assassins accompanied by the sounds of them pushing through the bushes. Their opponents panicked, not seeming to grasp the situation, but they still tried to fight back. However, the resistance they put up wasn’t much of a resistance.

Accepting the sword that Siegcrest tossed him, Asyut went around to provide support. Yuna could only hide behind Asyut’s back and make herself small. And, while being frightened of the horrible sound of flesh being severed and blood flying around, she earnestly wished for this to end quickly.

“I-I can’t believe this. What’s going on.”

The young boy, who was still on his bottom, seemed to realize it was safest beside Yuna and crawled to her.

“Is it your fault that everything became like this?”

“I’m sorry you got involved. But, right now, please bear with it and stay down.”

“No, I’m not kidding. I don’t want anything like this happening any more. –It’s probably best to end it quickly.”

“Eh?”

The innocent boy’s face suddenly turned cold. Those cold eyes overlapped with the piercing eyes of Duo in the past. Oh no, at the same time as this thought, the boy thrusted a dagger at Yuna’s chest. Asyut noticed this and turned around. –But he was too slow.

(I’m going to be stabbed–)

In that moment, something flashed in front of her eyes. Yuna, not knowing what that was, closed her eyes in preparation for the pain. But she wasn’t struck by pain and, instead, the boy in front of her cried out.

“GUH!”

When she opened her eyes timidly, the boy’s right hand was shot through with an arrow. The blood that ran down his hand started to make a stain on the ground drop by drop. The young boy turned around with irritation and Yuna followed his gaze.

There, Neisan was holding a bow.

“Next is your head.”

In the mayhem Neisan’s calm voice could be heard frightfully clear.

“–grh.”

The boy shouted something in a rough voice full of anger. But he realized this situation was too bad and ended up swallowing his words while glaring sharply at Neisan.

Neisan's gaze did not shake at all and he pulled back on the string of the bow as he faced the boy. The boy clicked his tongue and then quickly disappeared from this spot.

Neisan didn't chase the boy and instead calmly changed targets to the other assassins and brought them down one after another. Aiming at their legs, he made certain they were brought down to their hands and knees.

Even though their numbers rivaled each other, the difference in strength was evident. In a blink everything was settled and this time the last person collapsed onto the ground.

And then, finally, silence returned to the graveyard.

"Alriiight."

Siegcrest rested his large sword over his right shoulder with a thump.

"It's over, huh."

He declared that, satisfied.

"Wow, it's been a long time since we had a real battle."

"Don't be in such high spirits, idiot. First of all, why did it take that long for you to arrive. Thanks to that, there were many close calls."

"Even if you say that, we did the best we could because you guys weren't at the orphanage. I didn't hear anything about going to the graveyard from there."

"If you can't deal with that much then you're unneeded as a holy knight."

"A holy knight has limits too! In the end, we made it in time didn't we?"

As Yuna sat in the swaying carriage and listened to Asyut and Siegcrest quarrel, she felt that peace had finally returned.

After everything, their enemies were arrested by Siegcrest's subordinates and they were temporarily being taken to the royal palace in another carriage. No one

confessed, but Asyut and Siegcrest seemed to know that they belonged to the anti-saint faction.

Fortunately, there were no serious injuries on Siegcrest's side and no one in the anti-saint faction had fatal injuries. Only the young boy failed to be captured, but it seemed like his whereabouts was being searched for while they pursued the anti-saint faction.

For the previous director, Dankis, when they question him he spoke in a totter that took up quite some time. Finally putting together the information they got out of him, it seemed like that young boy suddenly appeared and tempted him to kill Celiastina. At first, he didn't agree because he didn't think he would really see Celiastina, but when he ended up facing her his emotions ran wild for some reason. He wasn't charged with a crime and, instead, was going to be sent to a special hospital for mental health. Yuna felt sorry because all this happened from her wanting to see him, and convinced Asyut, who finally nodded, that leaving Dankis as he was would do no good for him.

"But I still don't really understand."

In the carriage on the way back, Yuna spoke up for the first time in a long while, and everyone turned to look at her: Asyut, Siegcrest, and Neisan.

"Everyone knew that we were going to be attacked there, right?"

Suddenly, an uncomfortable atmosphere spread throughout the carriage. Neisan closed his eyes and took up a posture that showed he wouldn't join the conversation.

".....You see, I was asked by Asyut. He said he wanted several elite men to be sent unnoticeably because of the timing of the anti-saint faction's movements."

"I didn't ask you to come though."

Asyut added in a biting voice.

"It wasn't that bad. I'm worth a hundred men, and it actually worked out."

"Then, Asyut, you're the one who knew about this."

Feeling that Asyut and Siegcrest were about to reply to each other again, Yuna forestalled them and moved the conversation forward. Asyut pressed his lips together,

as if it were difficult to speak about, and he glanced at Neisan, who was sitting opposite of him.

“.....I... received information from Neisan.”

Neisan kept his eyes closed and did not move at all.

“Before we departed today, Neisan came to tell me that the anti-saint faction were aiming for the opportunity you went out, Lady Celiastina, and formed an assassination group to attack us along the way.”

“Really?”

Was that why he was there at the graveyard?

Neisan, who had shut his eyes, opened them a little and gave a slight nod.

“Yes.”

Although she received affirmation, Yuna couldn't find any words to follow.

“Because I was busy arranging everything at the time, I didn't ask in detail but how did you obtain that information?”

In Yuna's place, as she remained silent, Asyut asked that question.

“By becoming Lady Celiastina's bodyguard, I have been able to use the time where I would normally be training a little freely. But, because I am rarely needed as an actual escort, I have been using that time to head into town and collect information on the anti-saint faction.”

“But, when it comes to this time's assassination of Lady Celiastina, isn't this information you would only be able to obtain by stepping into a risky position?”

“.....That's right, this was information I gathered at the very last minute.”

The corner of Neisan's lips lifted up faintly. It looked somewhat like a self-deprecating smile.

“In other words, it's like this? Neisan used his perfect position where it wouldn't be

strange for him to get revenge on Celia to butter up to the anti-saint faction. Then he took it upon himself to be a spy and bring back information from the anti-saint faction to our side."

Siegcrest was sitting in a position where one knee was raised, and he rested his right arm on that knee in a lazy action.

"If that was how it went down, then it really was last minute. Did someone at the royal palace order you to infiltrate them?"

"No, it was my own decision."

"Then there's a possibility you can be charged with a crime."

"I am prepared."

Even at such a time he was speaking without any inflections. None of his emotions were conveyed. But Yuna decided that this was just Neisan as a person.

"There's no need to charge him with a crime."

Yuna muttered. Neisan raised his lowered head. Asyut and Siegcrest also looked at Yuna.

"Just because you tricked the enemy doesn't mean you're a friend."

"If you deceive all your allies, then you would not be called an ally."

As usual Asyut was fastidious.

"Then, I knew. I knew way back that Neisan showed himself a little with the anti-saint faction and got information. Is it okay now?"

Asyut's brows furrowed as if he were asking her what she was saying. Yuna had a random thought that, lately, Asyut had been expressing an abundance of emotions.

"So everything's okay now. It's okay. -Please, let it be okay."

She meant to sound firm but at the end her tone became an entreaty.

“.....Aa, is that so. Alright then.”

Siegcrest took over after Yuna with a voice that included laughter.

“Great job, Neisan. But next time don’t do such a reckless thing. Do it after you talk to me properly. Okay?”

“Hey.”

Asyut pestered him, as if wanting to say something, but Siegcrest merely smiled.

“Ah, alright, let’s stop now. I’m really tired too. Acting in an ambush doesn’t suit my personality, so I’m feeling really burned out. I’m gonna sleep now. Wake me when we reach the royal palace.”

Yuna snorted with laughter at that casual attitude.

“I’m tired today too and I’m going to sleep like Sieg. Wake me up when we reach the royal palace.”

“.....”

The remaining two people looked at each other. Asyut was the first to fold and he deliberately sighed.

“That seems to be the case. Don’t think too deeply on it and go to sleep as well. I’m also going to stop thinking and sleep. We’ll talk again when we return to the royal palace.”

He closed his eyes, as if sulking.

They stopped the carriage and took a break once on the way back.

Due to an outburst from the previous director, Dankis, in the other carriage, they had to stop for a moment. Siegcrest, who did not get up and really seemed to be asleep, was left as he was, and Asyut ran off to put everything in order.

In the languid silence Neisan, who had his eyes closed and did not make the slightest movement, suddenly appeared to remember something and opened his mouth.

“.....You are a kind person.”

Realizing that he was directing those words to her, Yuna kept silent and looked at Neisan.

“You’re concerned about me, when I acted on my own, and helped me without caring about how your own position might worsen.”

“.....”

“I cannot imagine you to be the same person who imprisoned me in the Holy Jail and ordered me to be tortured every day.”

Yuna tightened her arms which were hugging her knees.

“I wonder which one is the real you..... Up to now, since I have been a bodyguard candidate, I have been watching you from the shadows, Lady Celiastina. But the more I learn about you, the less I understand about you.”

And so, Yuna murmured thinly.

“Are you saying that even though you hate me, you won’t kill me yet?”

Her voice was calm to the point of surprising herself.

“Or is it true that, from the beginning, you contacted the anti-saint faction to help me?”

Neisan kept silent with his mouth closed.

“Hey, I had a strange dream a while back. Late at night, someone came into my room from the window and pointed a blade at me. In that moment, I was really disgusted with myself and accepted naturally that this person appeared to punish me. So I didn’t feel like resisting at all and just waited to be killed.”

“.....”

“But, you know, in the end that person didn’t kill me. He replaced the dagger in his hand and left the room. Even though he must have come to kill me, and even though it would have been extremely easy to kill me, he didn’t. Since then I’ve continued to wonder why he didn’t.”

“.....I believe-“

Neisan quietly opened his mouth.

“-that while hating you, that person noticed “something” by looking at you that could not be measured just by hate. And they want to know your true identity.”

“Then, your hate still hasn’t disappeared, huh.”

“Yes. I’m sure it never will.”

At that moment, Siegcrest turned over in his sleep and, at that echoing sound, their conversation died out.

By the time they arrived at the main gate of the royal palace, even the setting sun was almost hidden.

Asyut, who descended from the carriage first, turned around and offered a hand to Yuna as he always did. Yuna looked at that hand and hesitated for an instant but, in the end, she did not borrow his help and got down firmly onto the ground herself. Asyut’s brows furrowed faintly but he didn’t say anything and lowered his hand.

I’m sorry, Asyut. But I can’t take you for granted any more than this.

Yuna pressed her lips together and looked down. Under the cover of brushing away dust from her skirt, she hid her sorrowful face from him.

And then, suddenly, a red burning torchlight appeared, illuminating Yuna’s feet.

The torch was being held by Aeneas. She wondered how long he had waited here for their return; even in the dusk she felt like his face was pale. As he held the torch up silently, his eyes were not looking at Yuna but at the people descending from the second carriage.

When Neisan appeared at the end, Aeneas’ mouth twisted greatly. To the point where it looked like he would cry.

“.....So you did go to where Lady Celiastina was, Neisan.”

His trembling murmur was heard by Yuna.

“When I realized you weren’t in the royal palace, I thought my heart would stop.”

“.....Sorry.”

Neisan gave an honest apology.

“What did you plan to do by following Lady Celiastina and the others? To help them? Or because you were up to something?”

“.....Who knows.”

Aeneas was unmoved at Neisan’s suggestive answer.

“Fine then. I wasn’t able to go and protect Lady Celiastina, so I’ll think you protected Lady Celiastina in my place as well.”

Aeneas thanked Neisan with a thump to the shoulder.

“Great work, Neisan.”

In that moment Neisan’s expression, which had been blank up to now, contorted.

“Well, anyway, let’s get some rest. It’s already night.”

While stretching, Siegcrest said this carefreely. But a cold word from Asyut made him freeze in his stretch.

“You can’t possibly rest, because you have to deal with that group we arrested. First, we’ll report to the top.”

“Geh. Why me?”

“The vice-captain went out to the scene himself. I’ve taken that as a declaration of your intent to accompany me precisely to the very end.”

You’re a demon, Siegcrest muttered but Asyut turned a deaf ear to that.

“Aeneas, you will escort Lady Celiastina back to her room. Neisan, stand-by in your

room until you have another order.”

As expected, Asyut was accustomed to taking control over a space. Everyone nodded without objection and the long day was finally about to end.

But before that, there was one more thing.

Yuna requested Aeneas to take her to the night courtyard on their way back to her room, while thinking that it was still early and she might not be noticed.

Like she thought, there was no one in the courtyard. Even though she knew that, she sat in one of the stone chairs, and closed her eyes patiently. Aeneas waited in the corridor a little apart. If she didn’t meet who she was waiting for in a little while then she would head back for today.

But just then Linus came without much time passing. Yuna lightly waved a hand to greet him as he walked up to her.

“Good grief, you...”

Linus had a complicated look.

“You have some courage to summon me over and over again. If you want to see me that much, please don’t hesitate to come to my room in the morning, at noon, or at night.”

“I’ll pass at night.”

Yuna gave a small laugh.

“So, you went today, didn’t you? To the orphanage.”

“Mm.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“.....Mm.”

Wondering how she should say it, Yuna looked up at the sky which was completely dark.

“It seems like Celiastina’s power wasn’t twisted from the start. Things happened at the orphanage and it became like that. Celiastina really went through a lot of hardships.”

“I see.”

Mm, Yuna nodded once more.

“But it wasn’t just painful memories which were left behind. Someone who went through the same time as Celiastina is the orphanage director right now. She’s a wonderful person.”

Yuna spread her right hand open and moved her eyes to her white palm. She recalled the time she shook hands with Kazlow and her hand’s warmth.

“I want her to meet Celiastina again properly. I want Celiastina’s own voice to reach Kazlow.”

Not just Kazlow. There were many things Celiastina needed to face. The orphanage which hadn’t changed, the children’s laughter, and the asiatic jasmine which was blooming in the backyard even now–.

More importantly, she was the only one who could truly confront the previous director, Dankis. She couldn’t disappear from this world while continuing to push away the intense emotions she had at that time.

Linus took a seat beside Yuna and looked up at the sky in the same way.

“In the end, you’re saying you won’t become Celia’s replacement, hm.”

“.....That’s right.”

“My mother...”

Linus suddenly began to talk. Yuna kept her face raised, but looked at Linus beside her with her eyes.

“Her name was Malveneska.”

“Eh?”

“The saint before Celiastina.”

“Really!?”

Yuna forgot that it was night and raised her voice.

“You might already know, but my mother did not live a blessed life. That’s why, from the beginning, I had no illusions as to what a saint was. Rather, I was even afraid that these beings would continue to appear throughout the ages without pause.”

That’s how it was. Yuna was still surprised but she also felt a question in her chest unravel. The reason a young man like him had been chosen to be Celiastina’s guardian was because he was related to the previous saint. That he didn’t succumb to Celiastina’s ability to amplify death in those she connected with might have been the influence of that lineage.

“I also felt sorry for Celia. A girl who was born as a saint wouldn’t obtain happiness easily. And so I let her did as she pleased as much as I could. If an inescapable curse was to follow her around her entire life then, at the very least, I would not deny her.”

But well, Linus continued along with a sigh.

“You appeared, and now I don’t understand what a saint is. Because your body and mind is truly like a saint. I thought there could never be such a person, no, I still think that quite a bit, but if you could release Celia then I thought that could also be an optional path.”

Once again Linus faced Yuna.

“Does a girl like you really exist?”

His searching eyes brushed against Yuna.

“.....Won’t you tell me? About the real “you”.”

It was not heavy with emotion, but still an earnestly gentle voice.

“.....I am...”

Encouraged by Linus' eyes, Yuna started to speak haltingly. Ahead of her words, it felt like her overwhelming emotions would overflow, and she couldn't talk well.

"I was originally a person of this country. I was an ordinary village girl living with my family while we sold medicinal herbs in a small house not far from the royal palace. Really, everything was ordinary. I was their only daughter and my parents raised me with great care. There were a lot of children in the neighborhood, and we played every day like siblings. The customers who came to the shop were like relatives. Every day was normal but I was really happy."

It seemed like such a long time ago. To the extent where she almost didn't know if she had really passed those days.

"But, you see, one day I was hit by a carriage and died."

The impact in that moment– even when she tried to remember, she could only faintly recall a dull sensation.

"In truth, I should have ascended to heaven like that. But, right at that time, Celiastina's soul had reached its limits. Celiastina..."

Here Yuna closed her mouth. Was it okay to say it clearly? But she immediately realized that she came this far and, even if she hesitated, there was no choice.

"Celiastina... tried to kill herself. But she is a saint, and so she couldn't die like that. And so her soul is taking a rest for a while. During that time, my soul is to serve as Celiastina's substitute, and came to stay in this body. In other words, I'm just an ordinary human. Though I'm actually dead."

"Then, when Celiastina's rest ends?"

"At that time, I think I'll ascend to heaven this time. From the start I was told this was temporary. That's why I can't remain in this body like this."

Linus had a serious expression. There was a little silence. Yuna wasn't able to read what he was thinking about.

"What is your... real name?"

Yuna slowly closed her eyes at that gentle question.

She sucked in a deep breath and the slightly damp night air filled her chest.

When she opened her eyes again and looked up at the sky quietly, the starry sky was as beautiful as always.

“-Yuna.”

A nostalgic name.

A name as distant as those stars in the sky.

A name she thought would never be called again or spoken.

†

After that, Yuna took a bath, returned to her room, and sunk into the sofa with a loud sigh. She felt like she finally achieved one mind. -Today was a really long day where many things happened.

Her body was tired but her consciousness was strangely alert. When she thought back to what happened today and blinked, her feelings calmed each time.

By visiting the orphanage today, Yuna's hesitation cleared.

Like Ron said, Celiastina wasn't a person in a picture. She was certainly here, standing with her own will, with open eyes, crying, getting angry, and surely smiling. And she would beyond this. It had to be Celiastina herself who would focus on the path continuing ahead.

When that time comes some day, she would return everything to Celiastina. And she would give an encouraging push to that back.

It took her quite a long detour to decide on this resolution. If she had faced Celiastina properly the moment she entered this body then it might not have taken such a long time.

(I'm sorry, Cella.)

Yuna called her past name. I'm sorry for not noticing. I'm sorry for taking so long. But I've finally met you.

At last she also understood the reason she had been hated in the white space. She hadn't been able to give anything to the girl with a broken heart. She didn't notice, she didn't stay by her side, and she couldn't even remember. And then, in a place unrelated to her, Yuna had been filled with happiness.

Closing her eyes, Yuna leaned her head against the sofa's back again.

Inside a pleasant nap, memories of a young age were recalled.

Cella and her hiding inside the orphanage's storage room, while playing. They lit a candle and stared at the swaying flame. Because the teachers told them sternly that using fire was off limits to them as children, this was a big adventure for them today.

-Listen, Cella. Our time here is our little secret.

-Un, it's an absolute secret.

-Do you want to swap something to swear a promise?

-Swap?

-Yep. I'll give you this ribbon. I really like it, but if you'll take care of it...

-Thank you! Then I'll, umm, give you this brooch. Take care of it.

-Mm, I'll keep it in my treasure box.

-I'll keep mine safe too.

-My treasure box has a key, so I won't ever lose it.

-I'll always keep it hidden under my bed. So I'll be okay too.

(.....Hidden... under the bed.....)

Her mind suddenly shook and Yuna, who was about to fall asleep, abruptly came back to herself. What was that? Why did she remember that again? It was a fragment of a memory that she didn't remember even when she had been at the orphanage today.

While rubbing her eyes, Yuna raised her upper body from the back of the sofa.

(.....Celiastina?)

Something flashed suddenly in her chest.

Right now, hadn't that been Celiastina's memory?

Yuna stood up in a sluggish action. Her heartbeat gradually became quicker. Approaching the extravagant canopy bed, she kneeled beside it and stretched her hand out to the white sheets decorated with lace.

She slowly, slowly lifted it up.

There was a small wooden box there.

“This is...”

Pulling it towards her with her right hand, she scooped it up. It was a simple wooden box but to Yuna it was too dazzling. Calming her hands which seemed to tremble, she opened the lid.

“-!”

Had she always cherished this ribbon?

(That's.....)

Yuna could not stop from covering her face with both hands. At that action, the wooden box tumbled down to her knees but she wasn't able to care. Her convulsive sobs were sucked into this night's room.

Cella... Celiastina.

(I'm really, really sorry.)

And- thank you.

For keeping this distant promise without forgetting, thank you.

“I'll... wait.”

This time, even if everyone forgets you, I won't forget. Never.

“So definitely come back.”

She didn't know how much time she had left. But she would dedicate all of that time to Celiastina.

-Absolutely.

Making this strong decision, Yuna firmly gripped the ribbon which was damp with tears.

Afterword

“Hello, long time no see. Or, perhaps, it’s nice to meet you for the first time.

I am very happy for this book to be in your hands like this!

There has been quite some time since the first volume came out, and I cannot raise my head to the people who have been waiting for the second volume without forgetting or abandoning it.

At the time the first volume was completed, I felt a sense of accomplishment (arbitrarily) along the lines of “I can die whenever now”, so when the next publication was decided there was no pleasure. I remember feeling tense about having to work harder and give even more than the first volume. And so, to not become “lax” because it’s the second volume, I pulled myself up again and strove to give all of my best to the point of death.

With that, I took up the brush with the mental state that though this was called the second volume, it was still one volume, and continued “Light Beyond”. The general flow of the story hasn’t changed from the net version but episodes have been changed and added, and actually there are more revisions from the net version this time than there were in the first volume.

In the first volume, I put in efforts to write original episodes that weren’t in the net version, but this time I wrote with emphasis on the changing feelings of Yuna, the heroine. I have good memories of getting together with the director and thinking carefully and carefully and carefully and carefully (the rest has been omitted) about what kind of feelings Yuna is acting on. If I was asked “What would easily express Yuna’s image?”, the answer would have been “A good girl” up to now, but now I feel like I would say “A good girl but actually–” and trail off.

The other characters also took different actions compared to the net version. Some characters have more appearance scenes, and other characters have less scenes..... but it’s my intention to pour my love equally into all the characters. “He’s a really sad person,” is what the director said about Aeneas though, so I might have poured too much distorted love into him (lol).

Lastly, to Mr. Y who worked hard on the publication of the second volume and thought about this work with more passion than even I, the author, thank you very much. To Mr. Kishida Mel who drew these lovely illustrations that I couldn't look away from after seeing it once, thank you very much. To all the people who were involved in the publication of the second volume of who I was unaware of in my carefreeness, thank you very much. And then, to you who picked up this small book, thank you so very much!

Well then, it will be a pleasure if we can meet next time in the third volume of "Light Beyond".

2009 July."

An Old, Old Sibelius Story Passed Down

A long time ago, there were two beautiful twin sisters who lived in the land of Schlezel.

The two sisters closely resembled each other, to the extent where no one could tell them apart. The older sister's name was Rhodiani, and the younger sister was Endius. The two lived close to the entrance of the forest, a little ways off from the town. The two had lost their parents early and had no other relatives. Because of that, the two were bound by a strong bond. If one laughed, the other laughed; if one cried, the other cried. Even if their bodies were divided in two, their souls were one. This was how dear they thought of each other and trusted each other.

Both of them also had special skills. The older sister, Rhodiani, was very good at hand spinning. The threads she spun were even and delicate, to the extent where one would unconsciously want to rub their cheeks against it. The younger sister, Endius, was very good at weaving. The cloth she wove was smooth and gentle, to the extent where one would unconsciously want to hug it. The two made their living by selling the clothes they made like this.

These two beautiful twins were so very pure and so very honest and unselfish. Surely, only the gods who lived in the heavens were allowed to love them. Somebody once said that.

In the heavens, were many gods were said to live, such as the Lord God, Vida.

Amongst the gods, there was one that was still young, Ordyn, who felt a bit bored at his life in the heavens. And so, now and then, he would descend into the human world and peep at the lives of humans before returning.

One day, Ordyn went down into the forest on a whim and met the younger sister of the twins, Endius. Endius had come to draw water from the spring in the forest. Ordyn liked her at first sight, and Endius also had her heart taken by his virility. Just like that, the two of them fell in love.

Both of them promised to meet each other at the forest spring every third day, but

Endius was so enchanted by him that she could not wait even that long. The older sister, Rhodiani, immediately noticed that her younger sister was acting strange. When she asked, Endius spoke shyly about the person she had feelings for. Looking at how happy Endius was, Rhodiani too became happy. The two had one soul. If one was happy, the other would be happy.

Ordyn's feelings for Endius were extremely strong. He loved Endius in seriousness and soon thought about wanting to summon her up into the heavens. However, Endius herself showed a strong resistance to leaving her one and only sister behind. But still, Ordyn's passion slowly melted Endius' hesitation and, at last, he succeeded in making her nod.

Both of them had confirmed each other's resolve, but there was still a problem. The other gods opposed doing such a thing as welcoming Endius, a human, easily into the heavens.

They put out one condition. In 100 days, the two had to whisper their love to each other at the forest spring every night. If they could continue meeting each other without missing a single day, and if their affection hasn't faded, then at that time the other gods would approve of their love. Ordyn nodded, exultant. Endius was also happy to consent to this.

On the 10th night, the two praised the beauty of each other's eyes.

On the 60th night, the two praised the depths of each other's love.

And then, on the 85th night.

Endius suffered from a horrible fever. It had been a heavy burden on Endius' body to go out every night. Unable to even rise from her bed, Endius looked up at the ceiling with tears in her eyes. In this state, she could not go and meet Ordyn.

“Sister, what should I do?”

Endius whispered with a weak and hoarse voice. Rhodiani could not find any words to return. She could do nothing but grip Endius' hand. And Endius too returned the grip, squeezing her sister's hand.

“Sister, please go see him in my stead. You and I look entirely alike. Please, I beg of you.”

Rhodiani was surprised but thought it certainly was a good idea. Of course she knew the location of the spring. Rhodiani nodded without hesitation.

Like this, on the 85th night, “the two” praised each other’s generosity.

On the 100th night, which had been reached safely, Endius was in high spirits and very happy. Of course, Rhodiani was also supposed to be happy. With her younger sister being this happy, she should have been happy too..... and yet, Rhodiani could not smile from the bottom of her heart. –Aah! Even if their bodies were divided in two, their souls were one!

Rhodiani had, on the 85th night, in just that night, fallen in love with Ordyn.

Now, this first love had swelled to the point of scorching her body. But she could not stop her smiling sister from heading to her 100th meeting. Rhodiani somehow made the same smile as her sister and saw her off.

And then, just after an hour, Endius returned. What exactly had happened, Endius was crying terribly as she passed through the door. Rhodiani ran hurriedly to her sister and managed to hear the details about how she didn’t see Ordyn at the meeting place. Instead, there was a small owl perched on a tree beside the spring, who called out to Endius. According to the owl, she wasn’t able to be welcomed into the heavens because she deceived them–.

Aah, Rhodiani immediately knew the meaning behind the owl’s words. That 85th night! In the end, they couldn’t deceive the gods.

“I asked for one more chance. And it told me that if I were to spin thread from silkworms and weave a cloak that fit Ordyn perfectly, they would accept me– by tomorrow at noon.”

Impossible, Rhodiani thought. Endius was an expert at weaving, but not at spinning thread. It had always been Rhodiani’s role to spin thread. This was how both sisters made their cloths. Rhodiani suggested that she spin the thread, but Endius quietly shook her head. When her last teardrop splashed onto the floor, Endius began to work at once.

Once the cloak was finished, she was to bring it to the spring again before tomorrow

noon. If her work was approved then Endius would be welcomed into the heavens. Rhodiani turned the words she heard from her sister over and over again in her head. Complicated emotions whirled in her and she couldn't settle down. On the other side, Endius did nothing but work without stopping even once for a break. She spent quite a lot of time spinning thread and it wasn't as beautiful as what her sister could do, but somehow she accomplished it. And then, once she started weaving, the rest was her specialty. In the blink of an eye a beautiful cloak was completed.

Gradually, noon approached. Endius, whose eyes were bloodshot, held the finished cloak up to the sunlight and her expression finally relaxed. She must have been relieved, and certainly the cloak wasn't of bad quality. Seeing that, Rhodiani once again felt the gloom in her deepen.

We were always two people but of one person. We were always closely beside each other. And yet, that girl had made a cloak all by herself. For Ordyn, who only loved that girl.

In that moment, something shattered within Rhodiani with a sound.

Rhodiani brew some hot tea and mixed sleeping powder into it. She called out to Endius to take a rest and handed over that tea. Rhodiani watched intently as Endius thanked her with a smile and drained the cup. Soon, she was looking down quietly at her younger sister, who was unable to beat the drowsiness and laid down on the bed.

And then, holding the cloak which had just been finished, Rhodiani broke into a run.

On a tree, close to the spring, like Endius said, there was a single owl.

“I've brought it.”

When she timidly presented the cloak, the owl glanced at it.

“Very well, we shall invite you into our world. Ordyn is waiting in the heavens. Go and run directly on the path you can see on the other side. Do not look behind you, simply look ahead and run. If so, you will arrive.”

At the words about Ordyn waiting, Rhodiani's feelings were intensely stirred. She would be able to see him again and be loved by him; when she thought that, her feet

automatically started running. She ran as fast as she could on the path, like she was told. Just how long would it continue, she couldn't see the end. Soon, surely soon, as she told herself this, Rhodiani felt some uneasiness.

—What exactly would become of Endius when she awoke?

There was no doubt that Endius would be hurt to the point where she could not recover. Because she lost her beloved lover and her beloved sister at the same time, and due to betrayal.

Unable to bear this suddenly, Rhodiani stopped and turned around. When she did, wasn't that her house which she had left there in front of her? She could see clearly inside from the window. There was her sister, who was still sleeping soundly— and then, the shape of a man close beside her.

It was Ordyn, who should have been in the heavens. He lovingly caressed Endius' cheek, as she continued to sleep, and dropped a gentle kiss onto her. And then he smiled softly and continued to watch his lover's slumbering face.

Rhodiani felt so much shock that she couldn't breathe. Was that an illusion, or reality?

“You are not permitted to stop, Rhodiani.”

The owl's voice echoed through the forest.

“Now, run, you chose the heavens. Look straight ahead and run, do not look behind you.”

But, wait, isn't that Lord Ordyn? Rhodiani shouted in a soundless voice.

“For the sake of his lover, Ordyn threw away his status as a god. The two will be together for the rest of their lives as humans.”

Rhodiani began to move her legs again while in a daze. Whether it was by her own will, she no longer knew. Unable to think, she merely ran. She ran, and ran, and continued to do nothing but run.

An old man stood at the end of the path. The old man, who had gentle yet stern eyes, accepted Rhodiani with a single large nod.

“Do not regret deceiving your sister.”

“Yes.”

“However, you cannot be forgiven. You also deceived us twice.”

“Yes.”

“As promised, we welcome you into the heavens. However, you must atone. For a hundred years, you will bloom flowers around the spring every night. In order to bless those two and their descendants.”

“Yes–, I understand.”

“If done, I believe happiness will visit you as well, Goddess Rhodiani.”

Rhodiani was unable to stop her overflowing tears. These were tears of sorrow, tears of fear, and tears of regret. Yes, they might have been those, but they were surely tears of relief as well.

Like this, a girl disappeared from the human world, and a goddess was born in the heavens. A hundred years passed, and then two hundred years passed. It is said the flowers, which had begun blooming around the spring, cover the forest even now. However, those who know the reason for the beauty of those flowers may no longer exist.

Character Page

登場人物紹介



Asyut

シェリアステイーナの
婚約者であり、第一神聖騎士。

Celiastina
(Yuna)

冷血な聖女として恐れられていた。
現在はユーナの魂が身体に入っている。

Siegcrest

神聖騎士団副長。
おおらかで憎めない性格。
アシュートとは旧知の仲。



Neisan

イーニアスの親友。
ホリジエイルの被害者。

Aeneas

シェリアスティーナの護衛。
真っ直ぐな性格。シェリアスティーナ
(ユーナ)を慕っている。

Linus

宰相補佐にして
シェリアスティーナの後見人。
ユーナの事情を知る唯一の存在。

Ron

神出鬼没な好々爺。
シェリアスティーナのことを
よく知っているようだが…。

Celiastina (Yuna) [シェリアスティーナ (ユーナ)]

A coldhearted saint who is feared. Presently, Yuna's soul is in her body.

Asyut [アシュート]

Celiastina's fiancé, and the First Holy Knight.

Siegcrest [ジークレスト]

Vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights. Big-hearted, with a personality that can't be hated. An old friend of Asyut.

Linus [ライナス]

An advisor to the prime minister and Celiastina's guardian. The only person who knows about Yuna's circumstances.

Aeneas [イーニアス]

Celiastina's bodyguard. Has a straightforward personality. Loves Celiastina (Yuna) dearly.

Neisan [ネイサン]

Aeneas' best friend. A victim of the Holy Jail.

Ron [ロン]

A good-natured old man who appears in unexpected places at unexpected times. He seems to know a lot about Celiastina but.....



PtF by: traitorAIZEN